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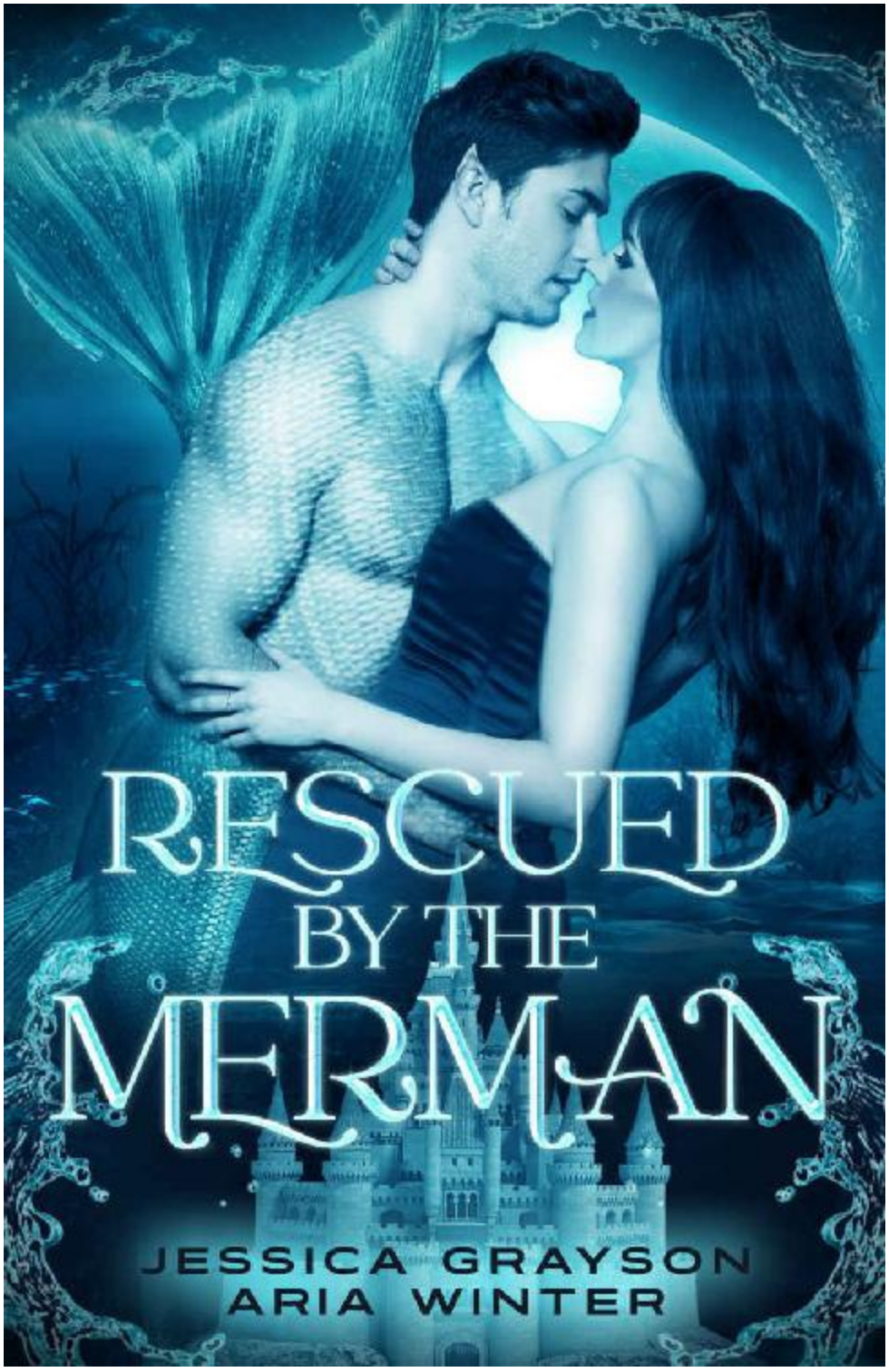

RESCUED BY THE MERMAN

JESSICA GRAYSON

ARIA WINTER

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To my husband: You are not just my husband, you are my best friend and my rock. Thank you for all

your love and support. I love you more than words can ever say.

-Jessica Grayson

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P R E F A C E

HALLA

Every night, I dream of fire and chaos. Destruction and ruin. The Healers tell me the nightmares will

fade over time, but I doubt this is true. I hold tightly to these memories because they remind me of

when I was whole.

I dream of a man with eyes as blue as the northern sea. His hair is the color of the obsidian stone

cliffs along the shoreline, and he studies me with a strange mixture of kindness and pity as my body

floats, limp and broken, among the crashing waves.

He is my anchor in an ocean of pain as I feel myself drifting away on the sand. Reaching down, he

gently strokes my cheek and whispers to me in the ancient tongue, “You must live, Princess Halla.”

I awaken with a start. The fog of my nightmares recedes. Dark images retreat like tides from the

shore, but one thing remains—my desire to find this strange man who saved me that day.

My brother insists he was a fever dream as I lay dying. An angel conjured in my mind to help ease

my pain and suffering. But when I close my eyes, I can still hear his deep voice and feel the whisper

of his touch across my skin as he stared down at me.

“You must live, Princess Halla. You must live.”

C H A P T E R 1

HALLA

Fire and destruction rain down from the sky. The golden scales of the dragon glint in the

sunlight as he flies overhead, releasing torrents of flame on our once proud city of Solwyck.

Alarms blare throughout the streets, mixing with panicked screams in a cacophony of

noise. The acrid smell of charred buildings and bodies chokes me. The fires of the city burn so hot,

beads of perspiration cover my brow.

“Take my sword, Halla. It is made of L’omhara, the only metal that will pierce the dragon’s

scales. You must save the city.”

My father’s hand wraps around mine as he places the handle of the sword in my grip.

Tears sting my eyes and blur my vision as I reach down and cup his cheek. Ash falls all around us,

whirling and dancing amidst the chaos like flakes of snow on the breeze.

“Father, you have to hold on. Please, you cannot die. I’m going to save you. I’m going to save us

all.”

“Where is Gerold?” he rasps. “Please, tell me he’s not—"

“He’s here, Father.” My eyes turn to my brother’s prone form nearby. “Unconscious, but alive.”

Despite his pain, relief momentarily registers on his pale features. “You and Gerold have been my

greatest joy in this life," he barely manages. "I love you both so much."

"I love you too, Father." A broken sob escapes me. "Please, don't die."

His breath comes in short, clipped pants as blood pools beneath his body. His gaze grows

unfocused, lifting to the sky. His grasp on my hand weakens with each passing moment.

"You must save the city, Halla," he whispers. "Promise me."

"I will, Father. I will."

His head drops, and he closes his eyes. His hand slips from mine and falls to the ground beside

him. Pain and devastation fill me. I lift his head into my lap and raise my voice in anguish to the sky.

Healer Althea rushes toward me. Her normally tighten woven golden hair loose from her braid

and covered in flakes of gray ash. Her worried gaze darts to my father's still form then back to me.

"Princess!"

Drawing in a deep breath, I blink back my tears and steel myself. "Take care of my brother,

Althea."

"Halla!" Her gaze drops to the bloodied sword in my hand. "What are you going to do?"

I grip the sword tightly as I turn my gaze toward the city. "I'm going to slay the dragon."

C H A P T E R 2

HALLA

W ith one final glance at my father’s body, I force myself to push down my fear. I made him

a promise, and now, I will keep it. If I do not slay the dragon, everyone will die. He

won’t stop until Solwyck is reduced to rubble and ash.

I turn to the edge of the castle rooftop, scanning the city in search of the monster.

People rush through the city below, racing downhill to the sea. The only place fire cannot touch,

where they believe they’ll be safe.

I watch ships set off from the harbor, full of our citizens. My eyes widen in horror when the

dragon heads toward them, releasing a torrent of flame across the decks.

Rage twists deep inside me. Sword in hand, I step onto the ledge. My heart thunders in my chest

as he makes a wide arc back through the city, raining down fire and destruction as he approaches the

castle. I draw in a deep and steadying breath, preparing myself to attack.

If I time it right, I can impale him. If I miss, I will fall to my death.

The heavy flapping of his wings creates swirling patterns through the thick smoke rising from the

fires of the city below. Time slows, and the space between each beat of my pulse spreads across an

eternity as he flies toward me in a blur of golden scales.

Fear tightens my chest as he approaches, but I force myself to focus and speak aloud to steel my

courage. “I am Princess Halla of Solwyck. I tremble before no one and nothing. I am proud, unbent

and unbroken. And today, I will avenge my father and save my people and my kingdom.”

The world shifts into slow motion as the dragon draws closer. His golden scales shimmering

iridescent in the last of the sun’s rays. By the time it has set, I will most likely be dead. But if my

death can save my people and my kingdom, it will have been a sacrifice well made.

The golden eye of the dragon locks onto mine a moment before he opens his mouth, releasing a

torrent of fire and destruction upon the castle as he passes beneath me. With my sword gripped firmly

in both hands, I angle it down and jump. My heart hammers and time slows as I fall through ash and

smoke.

My father’s sword has seen many battles and defended our family and our kingdom for several

generations. As my blade finds its mark and sinks deep into the dragon’s scaled flesh, I can feel the

spirits of my ancestors gathering around me, readying to welcome me home.

The dragon releases a bellowing roar, twisting and writhing.

I cling to my sword as the wind pulls at my form, trying to rip me from his back. I cannot let go or

I'll most assuredly fall to my death.

He turns his head and releases a stream of fire. The flames sear my armor, heating the metal and

burning my skin. A pained cry escapes me as I grasp the metal layers, singing my palm, and rip them

from my body as he begins a spiraling descent toward the sea.

His wings billow like great sails for a moment before he folds them to his back and dives to the

ocean. The water rushes beneath us with dizzying speed, and I can do nothing but hold on and brace

myself for the impact.

C H A P T E R 3

ERRIK

Iswim beside my brother, hugging the shoreline. We watch, horrified, as the golden dragon sets

fire to the city of Solwyck. Alarms blare through the streets as people cry out in terror, fleeing

toward the only place they believe is safe—the sea.

Ships hastily push off from the harbor, filled with women and children trying to escape the

destructive power of the dragon. He flies over the boats, releasing a stream of fire that sets the decks

aflame.

Several other vessels try to take off, and our people swim out beside them, beckoning humans into

the water for their safety. Some flee their ships and jump into the sea.

“Save as many as you can!” I yell, directing our people to help any of the humans who cannot

swim to stay afloat.

But there are far more humans than Mer here. Most of my kin take to the deeper waters and stay

there, preferring to avoid the land dwellers as much as they can. I watch in despair as a woman and

her two children remain on the deck of one of the burning ships, refusing to retreat into the water.

I call out to her, “We will catch you and your children. We will help you to swim.”

Her eyes are full of fear, but she staunchly refuses to listen. “No. You will drown us.”

That these humans still believe a ridiculous myth spread to explain fishermen who are lost at sea

confounds me. “You will drown anyway if you remain where you are.”

Instead of listening to reason, she takes her two children and runs below deck. I cannot bear to

consider their fate, burning alive when they could be safe.

Rappelling up one side and gripping the edge of the deck, I pull myself onto the burning ship.

“Errik!” My brother cries. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to save them.”

“No! You’ll burn with the ship if you go below deck!”

“I have to try!”

It is cumbersome to move above water with only two arms and a tail, especially when one has

lived one’s life completely underwater in a weightless environment. Heat sears my skin and my

scales as I drag myself across the deck to the hold.

The door is sealed shut, so I pound on the outside. “Come out! Let us help you!”

When I hear no answer, I brace myself then slam my shoulder against the door repeatedly until it

flies inward, shattering against the cabin walls.

Thick smoke billows from the hold. I cough when it invades my lungs, clogging until I can barely

breathe.

“You must come out! You’ll die in here.”

No one answers, and I do not know if they are already dead, but I cannot leave without trying.

“Errik!” My brother’s voice sounds beside me, startling me.

“Toren, what are you doing here?”

“I’ve come to help you.”

I don’t want to risk my younger brother’s safety, but we don’t have much time. I start down the

stairs, my tail dragging awkwardly behind me. When I reach the bottom, I notice the woman and her

children are not alone. Another woman and young girl lie unconscious beside them.

Without hesitation, Toren and I begin hauling their limp forms back up the stairs. I’m relieved

when two more of my kin appear at the door. They take the humans and send them down a chain of

Mer, over the deck and to the sea, into the waiting arms of more of my people.

Once everyone is rescued, we jump back into the water. One of the children wakes with a scream.

I rush to her side.

Her brown eyes are wide as she turns to me. “It is all right, little one. You are safe.”

“Are you going to drown me?” she mumbles.

“No. We are going to help you to swim and keep you safe from the dragon.”

She smiles tremulously.

An anguished wail echoes from the city, and I whip my head in that direction to spot a woman

crouched atop Solwyck castle, leaning over a body.

“Look!” one of the humans cries out, pointing to her. “It’s Princess Halla!”

I watch as she stands, sword in hand. The wind catches her long, scarlet hair as she strides to the

edge of the rooftop.

“She’s going to jump!” someone yells. “No! Not our princess!”

Dressed from head to toe in armor, she stands on the ledge with her sword upraised as if readying

for battle.

The dragon flies toward her, and I watch in stunned silence as she jumps from the edge and

impales his back, sinking her sword deep into the flesh between his wings.

The city shakes with his roar, and he begins twisting and turning, trying to shake her. She grips the

sword handle, stubbornly refusing to let go.

The dragon begins a spiraling descent down the mountain toward the sea. He twists again and

slams into the water.

My heart stops when the princess is thrown from his back. She slams against a nearby rock

formation, her body releasing an audible *crack* as she makes impact with the unforgiving stone. I

swim toward the princess, my tail beating frantically through the water; desperate to save her.

A rushing wave approaches behind her, and I know I will not reach her in time. Accelerating as

best I can, I watch the wave toss her limp form from the rock and force her beneath the surface. Panic

tightens my chest when I dive below the water and see her tumbling under the rolling wave.

She is still and unmoving when I wrap my arms around her back. I spin her to face me, and her

eyes snap open. *"Princess Halla."* I reach for her with my mind. *"You must stay awake."*

Flame-red hair frames her face, and blue eyes search mine. She reaches out and brushes her

fingers across my cheek.

"Your eyes… they are glowing. Are you an angel? Will you send me to join my father in the

great halls of my ancestors?" she replies in my mind.

My heart clenches. *"No, but I am going to save you."*

Without hesitation, I grip the back of her head, threading my fingers through her long, red hair. I

pull her into an embrace and seal my mouth over hers, giving her my kiss so that she may breathe

underwater.

When I pull back, I am relieved to see her breathing. Though all Mer possess this ability, I have

never used it to save a human before. *“My first,”* she thinks aloud, struggling to stay conscious. *“Your*

kiss is my first.”

She closes her eyes and goes limp in my arms. Fear steals through me that she is dead. Only the

rise and fall of her chest tell me she still lives. I must get her to help. She needs a Healer.

I make my way to the rocky shoreline beneath the castle walls. In the distance, I notice several

Mer helping the humans back to the beach. Now that the dragon has been slain, it is safe for them to

return to their city, but their work has only just begun.

The air is thick with smoke. Ash falls like snow, blanketing the buildings and streets. The once

shining and proud city of Solwyck, known as the jewel of the kingdom, is on fire and burning.

Halla’s form is limp in my arms as I pull her onto the obsidian sand beneath the dark cliff wall of

the castle. A glance at my surroundings reveals that no one is coming this way. All are swimming

toward the main beach and the harbor.

I lift my gaze to the palace overhead and notice a woman with long golden hair staring down at

me from the rooftops. “Princess!” she shrieks and disappears behind the wall.

Halla stirs beside me. I reach down and take her hand. “Princess Halla. Please hold on. Help is

coming.”

I’ve never seen a human up close before. Her long, red hair fans beneath her like a beautiful halo

against the obsidian sand. I trace my eyes over her face, noting the fine and delicate structure of her

nose, brows, and cheeks. The tops of her ears are rounded instead of sharp-tipped like mine. Gently, I

cup her cheek and brush the pad of my thumb across her petal-soft skin. She is the most beautiful

female my eyes have ever beheld.

Her eyelids flutter open, revealing eyes as blue and deep as the sea. Sunlight breaks through the

clouds, accentuating the many spots on her otherwise pale skin. “What happened?” she murmurs.

Gently, I brush the hair back from her face. “You killed the dragon. You saved the city of Solwyck,

Princess Halla.”

She shifts slightly in my arms, hissing in pain at the movement. “Everything hurts. Am I dying?”

Her words strike terror in my heart. “No. Help is coming. You must hold on.”

The tide rushes over us, and as the water retreats, I note the fine trail of red that follows in its

wake.

Frantically, I move my hands down her form. Her tunic and pants are tattered and scorched by the

fire, revealing the pale expanse of flesh beneath, interspersed with areas of redness and blistering

skin. I reach beneath her, tracing my fingers across her back to search for the injury that is bleeding.

When I pull my hand away, it is covered with blood.

I rip a long strip of fabric from her tunic and wrap it tightly around her torso, desperate to staunch

the bleeding as I shoot another glance at the castle and cry out. “Help! The Princess is injured! She

needs a Healer!”

“I’m coming!” I recognize the woman’s voice somewhere nearby. Close, but not close enough, I

fear.

A featherlight touch on my cheek draws my attention back to Halla. Her blue eyes are bright with

tears as she brushes the tips of her fingers over my face. “Are you an angel?”

Despite my worry, a faint smile crests my lips. She has already asked me this before. I take her

hand in mine. “No.”

“Then why do I feel like I’m dying?” she breathes as another tear slips down her cheek.

I brush it away with the pad of my thumb. “You must live, Princess Halla,” I whisper. “You must

live.”

Her head falls back and fear wraps tight around my chest as she goes unconscious.

The sound of footsteps crunching over the rocky sand behind me draws my attention. I turn just as

the woman from earlier comes into view. Her long silver-gray hair is tied in a loose knot at the nape

of her neck and her face is pale and drawn as she drops to her knees beside the princess.

“She’s bleeding,” I tell her. “She needs help.”

“I’ll tend to her.”

The sound of shouting voices carries on the wind and the Healer’s eyes go wide. “You should go.

Some still believe the terrible lies about your people trying to drown them.”

“But—”

“Thank you for saving her, but you must go before anyone else comes.”

I dip my chin in a firm nod and retreat into the water. I swim out to a nearby rock and hide behind

it, watching as the woman gathers the princess into her arms. Two guards rush to aid her and carry the

princess back into the castle.

Please. I send a silent prayer to any gods who may be listening. *Save her.*

C H A P T E R 4

HALLA

Strange images rush toward me, and I wake with a start. Even as my eyes blink open, I still see

him—the man who saved me. His eyes are as blue as the northern sea, his hair is the color of

the obsidian stone cliffs along the shoreline, and he observes me with a strange mixture of

sadness and concern.

Closing my eyes, I can still feel the whisper of his touch across my face as he spoke to me in the

ancient tongue. *You must live, Princess Halla. You must live.*

“Halla?” A familiar voice calls from the hallway.

“Enter!” I respond.

My brother, Gerold, enters a moment later with Healer Althea. His warm, blue eyes, so like mine,

travel over me as he sits on the edge of the bed and takes my hand. “Good morning, my dear sister.

How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” I lie, and his expression falls. Gerold and I have always been close, and he can tell when

I do not speak the truth. I want so badly to tell him exactly how I’m feeling, but the golden crown atop

his head, nestled in his red hair, reminds me of all the burdens now resting on his shoulders. I do not

want to add to them.

“You know you can tell me anything,” he offers. “I may be king now, but I am still your brother,

and I will always have time for you.”

A faint smile ghosts my lips. “Sometimes I think it’s as if you can read my mind.”

Althea tenderly brushes the hair back from my brow. “Your late mother always commented that

you not only looked like twins but thought the same way, too.”

Gerold’s smile doesn’t erase the sadness in his eyes. He misses her just as much as I do. Now that

Father is gone as well, the pain cuts even deeper.

“Can you move your feet for me?” Althea asks.

Clenching my jaw, I turn my focus to my legs, willing them to move. A little over a month has

passed since the accident, and I still have not regained full use of my lower body. At least some of the

feeling has returned, but that doesn’t help me to walk.

Slowly, I flex and extend my foot. She places her palm against the sole and asks me to push

against her resistance.

My brother observes intently as I grit my teeth and struggle to push against her hand, but my lower

body is still so weak, it’s disheartening.

Althea does her best to remain cheery as she lifts her gray head. “You are improving.”

What she doesn’t say is that I have not improved much.

I squeeze Gerold’s hand. “Have the Fae agreed to send their Healer?”

I’m anxious to know if he’s heard anything. Healers from many kingdoms have come at his request

to see if they can do any more than Althea, but so far, no one has been able to help me. The Fae are

my last hope.

Gerold sent an ambassador to the kingdom of Anara, hoping they might send one of their Healers

to assess me. We never would have asked them for anything before, since it was clear they had no

love for humans. But Gerold took a chance to send someone anyway, asking for help. The Fae are my

last hope.

Well, technically not my last. There is always the blood witch who lives just outside the city. I

shudder inwardly at the thought. Witches are dangerous, and deals with them should never be made

lightly, for there is always a steep cost.

“Did you sleep well?” Gerold asks, and I know he’s really asking if the nightmares of the day I

was injured have finally stopped. They haven’t, but instead of telling him this, I focus on the part of

the dream that intrigues me the most.

“I dreamed of him again. Have you found out anything?”

He lowers his gaze. Ever since I told him of the man who saved me, he has searched high and

low, but no one has stepped forward. I want to thank him, but it’s more than that. I want to know the

face that haunts my dreams every night and fills my thoughts as I go through my days.

“Do you remember anything else that might help us to identify him?”

A new part of the dream came to me last night—something I did not recall until now. I reach up to

touch my mouth, remembering the brush of his lips upon mine. “I think he was one of the Mer,

Gerold.”

Gerold cocks his head to the side. “Why do you say that?”

My face heats in embarrassment. As close as I am to my brother, I do not want to tell him about

the kiss. I shrug. “Just a feeling.”

“Do you remember a tail? That might be a clue,” Gerold grins teasingly. “Unless…” He arches a

brow. “It is as I’ve suspected, and he was a conjuring of your imagination.”

I purse my lips. “I did not imagine him.”

“It’s not unusual to hallucinate when you’ve been heavily injured. The mind can play tricks and

create false images.” At my disapproving look, he shrugs. “Maybe you *were* saved by one of the Mer,

but he was long gone by the time we found you on the shore.” He turns to Althea. “Althea found you,

and she saw no one nearby, is that not right?”

Althea nods. “You were alone on the beach, Halla.”

I’ve heard this all before, but in my heart, I know I was not alone. I feel it. “I need to find him,

Gerold. I want to thank him.”

He sighs. “If he was one of the Mer, you know how they are—an elusive lot. They do not like to

interact with our kind.” A grin tilts his lips. “He did not steal your heart away, now did he?”

Heats blooms across my cheeks as the memory of the kiss overtakes my thoughts once again.

“No,” I reply. “I merely wish to thank the man who saved my life. That is all.”

Gerold arches a teasing brow. “Well, if he was a Merman and he returns for you…If at any time

you hear a siren’s call and feel compelled to go to the sea, please inform one of the guards before you

do so, all right?”

I playfully hit his arm, and he starts laughing.

“Don’t worry,” I tell him. “It’s not as if I could make my way down to the water alone anyway.”

Laughter dies in my throat as I look at the wheeled chair by the bed. It was a wonderful idea, but

not much use here in Solwyck. The city is built upon a hill that slopes toward the sea across many

stairs and steep inclines I cannot simply wheel down without help.

Gerold’s expression turns grim. “I am sorry, my dear sister. Our men are working as fast as they

can to accommodate your chair.”

His crew of workers is constructing inclines for my chair so that I may move about the castle

more easily, but until then, the only place I can be semi-independent is on this level of the castle. If I

want to go from one level to the next, I must ask the aid of the guards or my brother to carry me where

I wish to go. It is frustrating. Especially since I've always taken pride in my independence.

I clench my jaw, trying but failing to keep the bitter edge from my tone as I reply, "I only wish you

did not have to make any changes to accommodate that infernal chair."

Althea purses her lips. "Do not sulk. It is not becoming of a princess."

Her words make me feel as if I'm seven years old again. Althea may be a Healer, but she has also

been like a surrogate mother to Gerold and me ever since our mother died.

"I'm not sulking." *I'm devasted. There's a difference.*

Althea turns to Gerold, who stands and walks to the balcony to give us some privacy as she lifts

my dress. I follow her gaze as she inspects my ruined flesh. I remind myself that it would have been

worse if I hadn't been wearing armor when I was hit by the dragon's fire. The thick scar tissue covers

much of my torso, and I tense when her fingers trace over the uneven areas on my skin.

She cups my cheek. "It could have been worse, Halla. At least your face was spared, my angel,"

she says, using the beloved nickname she bestowed upon me as a child.

Tears sting my eyes, but I blink them back. "Who will want me like this?" I gesture to my burned

flesh and my legs.

Only a few days ago King Gronlund of Skallage sent word that, due to my condition, he was

dissolving the betrothal agreement between me and his son, Prince Edwyrd. I wasn't in love with

Edwyrd, but the rejection stung just the same.

Gently, Althea combs the hair back from my face. "Any man who cannot see past the outside to the

beautiful, brave person you are within would not be worthy of you."

I nod. She is right; perhaps I am blessed in a way. I might have married a man only to find out

later that he wanted me only for my title. This way, if I do find someone, I'll know that he loves me

for me.

I grab my legs and drag them over the edge of the bed. I pull my wheeled chair close and use my

board to transfer.

"I'll be ready in a moment," I tell Althea and my brother as I make my way to the cleansing room.

It doesn't take me as long to get dressed as in the first days after the accident. I'm both glad and

disheartened at how quickly I've acclimated to living without the full use of my legs.

Gerold carries me downstairs to the dining hall for our first meal. One of the staff follows with

my chair. The guards bow as we pass, and when they straighten, I see the burning devotion that has

become all too commonplace since I awoke after I killed the dragon. I'm a hero to the kingdom and its

citizens.

Sighing heavily, I glance down at my now useless legs, thinking of all I lost to achieve this title

and the love of my people.

I struggle to remain cheerful as we gather around the table.

"We are making great strides in cleaning the city. We are even beginning to rebuild. I can arrange

for you to take a tour, if you'd like," Gerold offers.

The last thing I want is to be carted around in a carriage, looking down on hardworking people as

if I'm some pampered princess. "Thank you, but I'd prefer to stay here for now."

A man approaches the table, bowing low before me and my brother. "Your Grace," he begins.

"We've finished the ramp as you instructed. Would you like to inspect the work?"

Gerold smiles. "Excellent news. We would love to." He stands. "Come, Halla. I believe this will

brighten your day."

I don't tell him that it will take much more than a ramp to make me happy. Instead, I follow him in

my wheeled chair, curious to see what he's had done.

I'm surprised when he leads me outside the castle into the side courtyard and the passage that

leads down to the sea. I roll to a stop, waiting for Gerold to turn around and lift me into his arms

since we're approaching more stairs.

He turns back to me, a sly grin quirking his lips. "Are you coming or not?"

My brow furrows as I wheel past him. My face splits in a bright smile when I spot the newly

constructed ramp that leads down to the shoreline. I've always loved the sea, and Gerold knows I

would often jog back and forth along the beach and then go for a swim after my run. Carefully, I guide

my chair down the ramp as Gerold follows me.

When I reach the shoreline, I notice flat stones laid in the sand, creating a path I can roll my chair

down.

Gerold grins. "What do you think?"

"I love it!" I beam.

I do. This is the best present he could have possibly given me.

I turn my gaze out to the sea and my jaw drops when I notice a blue fin sink beneath the surface. A

flash of memory flits through my mind. I remember a blue tail when I was floating, limp and broken,

in the water.

I scan the area, watching for any movement or sign of a Mer.

“What are you doing?” Gerold asks.

“I… thought I saw something.”

“Your Merman rescuer?” A teasing smile crests his lips. “Perhaps he’s come to steal you away.”

I would roll my eyes, but I’m too busy staring at the water. I wish to find him—this mysterious

Merman who rescued me. He haunts my dreams, and I need to know why.

C H A P T E R 5

ERRIK

It’s been a little over a month and I’ve heard no word about Princess Halla. I cannot stop thinking

about her, wondering if she is all right. Against my father’s wishes, I have been swimming along

the shoreline, hoping to discover whether she still lives.

However, the docks are quieter than normal. Most of the ships were burned and now lie at the

bottom of the sea after the dragon’s attack. The people of Solwyck are busy cleaning up, trying to

rebuild their once glorious city.

Sailors and dockworkers are usually a rather chatty lot, but it seems even they have little news of

her condition. There are rumors that she will never walk again. I pray this isn't true.

Walking for humans is like swimming for my kind. I cannot imagine how difficult my life would

be if I suddenly lost the ability to swim.

Movement in the water beside me startles me. I spin toward it and find my brother, Toren.

"I knew I'd find you here," he says. "Why have you returned? Father will be angry if he finds out

where you are."

I arch a brow. "Then I suggest you do not tell him."

He purses his lips. "Father was already angry at you for turning down the offer of betrothal to

Princess Allana. Imagine if he found out now that you're here after he has expressly told us to avoid

humans."

"And who will tell him?" I cross my arms over my chest. "You are the only one who knows."

He runs his fingers roughly through his short, dark hair. "I will not report you, but if anyone else

sees you out here, word is bound to get back to him. Why are you still coming here? What are you

hoping to find?"

I try to think of a lie but finally decide I do not want to keep secrets from my brother. We have

always been honest with each other, and I don’t want to end that now.

“The woman I saved—she was Princess Halla. I merely wish to know if she still lives.”

“Is that all?” he asks, a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

My brother knows me too well. “That’s all,” I reply, but he doesn’t seem convinced.

He studies me with narrowed eyes. “Well, you shouldn’t be here. You need to come home. Father

was looking for you; that’s why I came. To warn you.”

Frustration burns through me. “I will return shortly. For now, I—”

I stop short when something catches my attention out of the corner of my eye. I whip my head

toward the castle and notice a flash of red hair. I recognize the princess. A tall man with hair of the

same color walks alongside her as she rolls down the path in a strange, wheeled chair.

It reminds me of the carriages the humans sometimes ride around in, but those are always pulled

by horses. I dive beneath the water and swim closer, hoping to get a better look.

When I surface, I conceal myself behind a large rock formation jutting above the water line. Toren

follows me.

“What are you doing?” His voice is a low hiss. “They might see us.”

“That’s the princess. I want to see how she is doing. Besides, the land dwellers know there are

Mer in these waters. We helped them during the attack, remember? What does it matter if they see

us?”

“That was an exception. Humans are dangerous, and many of them believe we are, too. Do you

not remember the family we forcibly had to save because they’d rather risk their lives in a burning

ship than accept our aid?”

I frown. “Not all humans dislike us.”

“Then why are we hiding?” He huffs, gesturing toward the beach. “We’re practically spying on

the princess now. Why is that, Errik?”

I clench my jaw. “Because she is with a male. You’ve seen how protective they are of their

females. It’s almost as if they believe we mean to steal them away.”

Toren laughs, then his expression grows curious. “I wonder if that really works?”

“What?”

“Our song,” he replies. “Does it really lure the humans to the sea?”

I shrug. “I think it is mere curiosity that draws them to us when we sing. Not some sort of

bewitching enchantment.”

It’s terrible that this rumor makes humans so wary of us. I think back on the woman who would

have rather died on a ship with her children than trust us. Even after she regained consciousness and

realized we had saved them, she fought our people as they tried to help her back to shore. Fear often

breeds hatred, to all our detriment.

Long ago, our kind were enemies, but we finally made a truce with the land dwellers. The last

thing we need is renewed hostility between us. So I struggle to believe that some humans are still

fearful, even after we helped them during the dragon’s attack.

Toren and I continue to observe Princess Halla and the man walking behind her as they move

along the shoreline beneath the castle. The black cliff wall gleams with a pearlescent sheen beneath

the rays of the sun.

The castle is made of shimmering, white stone, on top of the wall. The spiraling towers stand

proudly beneath the pale blue sky. The shimmering silver rooftops are like glowing beacons. The

bold, blue-and-silver banner of Solwyck castle hangs from the tallest tower, fluttering in the wind.

This part of the coast is more rock than sand. I observe as the princess struggles to move the chair.

It would undoubtedly be easier for her to walk, and I fear the rumors must be true. She has lost the use

of her legs.

They stop, and the man takes her hand. He brings the back of it to his lips in a brief kiss, then

leaves, walking back along the shore until he turns and makes his way up the winding path to the

castle.

The warm, saline breeze whips through her long red hair as her luminous blue eyes watch the sea.

The tide is low now, so there is no worry of her being overcome by waves, but I wonder what she

means to do down here.

Cautiously, I slip beneath the water and move closer, concealing myself behind another grouping

of rocks jutting up from the water. Toren follows, and even though I am not facing him, I can sense his

judgment, heavy at my back.

When I stop, he moves up beside me. “Grandfather once told me that the castle was built on that

cliff because of these rocks.”

“What do you mean?”

He glances around at the many tight formations that line this part of the shallows. “Not only is it

shallow here, but the rocks make an approach difficult to navigate. So, there is little chance an

invading force could attack the castle directly by sea." I had never considered this, but he is right.

"Father says there is a good chance another kingdom, or ever pirates, may try to invade."

Alarm skitters across my skin. "Why?"

He gestures to the ruined city. "They have been weakened by the dragon's attack."

Worry tightens my chest as I turn my gaze back to Halla. "Surely, Father would provide them aid

if they were attacked by sea."

"I do not think so," Toren replies. "You know how much he hates them after Mother's death."

"Mother's death was an accident."

"It does not matter. He holds them and their ships responsible."

I recall that horrible day. Our people were trying to save the humans during a terrible storm. They

were caught out on the open sea. Their ships broke apart beneath a strong wave, injuring and killing

several of our kin who were trying to help. Mother was among them.

Pushing the dark memory from my mind, I return my attention to Princess Halla.

My jaw drops when she gathers the hem of her tunic and lifts it over her head, discarding the

fabric onto the sand beside her. She then unfastens her pants, carefully tilting her body on the chair as

she slides the material down her legs.

“What is she doing?” Toren asks beside me. “I thought the humans disliked nudity.”

He’s right. While our people think nothing of it, the humans only disrobe to bathe or to mate. The

only reason our females wear shells to hide their breasts is that they hate the attention they receive

from human males otherwise when they swim too close to shore.

I notice that Halla still wears a band of material across her chest to cover her breasts and a scrap

of fabric between her legs that hides her pelvis. For some reason, the sight of her makes my heart rate

quicken.

“I do not know,” I reply to my brother as I continue to watch her, wondering what she plans to do.

She grips the handrails of her chair tightly and pushes herself up as if trying to stand. I frown

when her arms tremble with the exertion of holding her weight while her legs do not move to support

her. She collapses onto the rock and sand.

I gasp. Without thinking, I rush toward her, my tail propelling me at full speed beneath the water to

reach her quickly.

“Where are you going?” Toren shouts.

“To help,” I call over my shoulder, not bothering to look back.

“Stop, Errik. You should not—”

I dive beneath the water, unwilling to hear the rest of his sentence. I know what I’m doing is

wrong, but I cannot leave her lying on the beach. I want to at least help her back into her chair.

“Errik!” My brother’s voice rings in my head beneath the water as he uses our mind link to speak

to me. *“Come back!”*

“No!”

Ahead, I stop short when I notice Princess Halla has entered the water. Her legs float behind her,

unmoving as she raises her arms in long strokes and begins swimming out to sea.

“What is she doing?”

“I do not know,” Toren replies . *“But it is none of our concern. You need to come back with me.*

Now.”

“I will come later.”

“Fine, but do not say I didn’t warn you. If Father catches you out here, you will be punished.”

I don’t bother to answer because he’s right. Yet I do not care. I’m more interested in following

Halla.

She continues swimming, keeping her head above water because humans cannot breathe beneath

the waves as I do. I remain hidden beneath the surface, following behind her at a safe distance to

avoid alerting her to my presence.

Exhaustion is evident in her features and movements as she begins to struggle with each stroke.

Yet, she perseveres. Ahead lies one of the larger rock formations, so expansive it is like a small

island. Rocks surround and shield its beach from the view of the castle. I suspect this destination is

her goal.

Sure enough, when she reaches the island, she pulls herself onto the rock. Panting heavily, she

drags her legs out of the water and twists onto her back, staring up at the sky. I hoist myself onto a

rock behind her so that I might observe her while remaining hidden. I do not wish to scare her.

The thin bands of fabric, that cover her, cling to her body. The outline of her breasts peeks through

the silken material, as well as a curious patch of red hair between her legs, which are not entirely

still. I watch her slowly move her feet, but when she sits up and lifts her thighs with her hands to

position them, I grow concerned.

It seems the rumors are true. She has very minimal use of her lower half.

I observe as she props herself up against a rock, staring out at the waves. She lowers her head

into her hands and I notice the slight quake of her shoulders. When a hoarse sob escapes her, I realize

that she is crying.

Her sadness tears at my heart. “Are you all right?” I ask from my hiding place.

She stills and wipes at her face. “Who’s there?”

“I mean you no harm, Princess,” I offer quickly to soothe her fears.

She turns her head, searching for me. “Your voice,” she says. “I know it. Who are you?”

Does she remember me? Before I can ask, she speaks again.

“You’re the one who saved me, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“What is your name?”

I hesitate for a moment, uncertain if I should identify myself. Instead, I ask her a question. “Why

do you cry?”

She wipes at her face again, brushing away tears. “Because I cannot use my legs. My back was

injured when I fell from the dragon’s back and crashed into the sea.” Her voice catches. “The Healers

do not know if I will ever be able to walk again.”

Sadness plagues me. A human without the use of their legs is like a Mer unable to use their tail to

swim. “I am sorry, Princess. Truly.”

She sniffs and wipes again at her tears. “I’ve searched for you.”

“You have?”

She nods. “I do not recall much, but I do remember that if you had not rescued me, I would have

drowned. I wanted to thank you for rescuing me.”

“You are welcome, Princess.”

“Halla,” she says. “You can call me Halla.”

“Halla,” I repeat her name aloud.

“Are you one of the Mer?”

I hesitate before answering, “Yes.”

“Can I see you?”

I still. “Are you certain you wish this?”

She nods.

“You are not afraid?” I ask, just to be sure.

“Why would I be? You rescued me.” She pauses. “If you will not come out, can you at least give

me your name so I might thank you properly for saving my life?”

“My name is Errik.”

“Errik,” she repeats, and I love how my name sounds on her tongue… more than I know I should.

“Thank you, Errik. I am forever in your debt.”

“You owe me nothing, Halla. I am glad I was able to rescue you.”

She lowers her gaze to the sand. “Will you at least tell me if your eyes are blue like I remember? I

see them almost every night in my dreams, you know.”

My heart stutters in my chest. “You dream of me?”

A huff of air leaves her parted lips as she smiles. “Yes.”

I draw in a deep, steeling breath and emerge from my hiding place. As I do, the thought occurs to

me that she may not like what she sees. After all, I am very different from her kind. I may not spend

much time around humans, but I’ve heard enough from my kin to know that they do not easily accept

those who are different.

Some even find us monstrous to behold.

As soon as she turns to face me, I’m struck by her beauty. She is more stunning than I remember.

Her eyes are as blue as the ocean. Her red hair falls over her shoulders in long, silken waves. My

gaze travels down her form to the sensuous curve of her breasts and the gentle flare of her hips. For

all the strength I witnessed in her the day she slew the dragon, I'm surprised by how slight and

delicate she appears. The women of my kind possess heavily muscled forms.

Worry fills me when I notice her mouth drifting open and a strange red coloring flaring across the

bridge of her nose and cheeks, accentuating the many spots across her otherwise pale skin.

My heart sinks, for I fear she finds me hideous to behold.

"Your eyes," she breathes, her voice full of wonder. "They are glowing. Just as I remembered."

Her expression changes and she tips her head to the side. "Why did you leave?"

Her question confuses me. "Leave?"

"My brother said when they found me, you were already gone."

"Forgive me. Hiding is a habit, I'm afraid. Humans have not always been friendly to my kind, so

we are taught from infancy never to be caught on land."

"Oh." She lowers her gaze, and her small brow furrows. "Why are you here, then? Why did you

follow me?"

"I…" I try to think of an excuse to skirt the truth but can invent none, so I decide to be honest. "I

have worried for you ever since that day. I wanted to make sure you were all right."

"Aside from my legs, I am fine." Her blue eyes brighten with tears. She sniffs and brushes the

drops from her cheeks with her hands. "Really, I shouldn't be crying. It's not as if there is no hope.

My brother has sent for a Fae Healer who has agreed to try and help me. They are known for their

healing prowess." She pauses and looks down at her feet, slowly curling her toes. "And I have some

movement and feeling, which is better than none."

Happiness blooms in my chest. "This is good."

"Yes," she agrees. "It gives me hope."

C H A P T E R 6

HALLA

He is the most gorgeous man I have ever seen. He has short, straight, black hair that hangs just

above his brow. The tops of his ears are pointed like the Fae. With a sharp jaw that could

cut glass, his face is regal, but his eyes draw me in most.

Their blue glow reminds me of the sea alight with a sunset. I allow my gaze to travel down his

form. His body is powerful, built of lean, sculpted muscle. His upper body appears mostly human

before tan skin slowly turn into a deep blue tail, starting at his waist, that matches the ocean. It is

longer than I expected, and the wide fan on the end is nothing short of stunning, swiping lazily back

and forth before him.

His scales shimmer beneath the sunlight, and I note that his entire body seems to glisten with a

pearlescent sheen. His fingers are tipped with lethal black claws, but they do not scare me. If he'd

wanted to hurt me, he could have done so while he was following me earlier. When he smiles, he

bares two rows of gleaming, white fangs. Instead of making me feel afraid, they only add a lethal edge

to his handsomeness.

I lift my gaze back to his glowing blue eyes, and the contact makes my cheeks heat in

embarrassment. *Can he tell that I find him attractive?*

He lowers his gaze. "Forgive me. I do not wish to scare you."

"Scare me?"

He blinks. "You are not afraid?"

I smile. "Why would I fear you?"

"My appearance does not bother you?"

"No," I deny vehemently. "You are the most beautiful man I've ever seen." Heat sears my face and

neck, and I wince inwardly as the words escape my lips before I even realize I've spoken them aloud.

He arches a teasing brow. "I believe the word you were searching for is *handsome.* "

"Yes, of course, it is," I laugh softly, both surprised and glad by his teasing, avoiding any

awkwardness between us after my words about his appearance.

His lips curve in a gorgeous smile that makes my heart rate quicken.

He shifts slightly, drawing my attention back to his tail, and I grow concerned. "How long can you

remain out of the water?"

"I am fine for now. My people often lie in the sun for many hours at a time without any

consequences."

My shoulder sag in relief. Cautiously, I scoot closer to him. "May I touch you?"

He stills. His piercing blue eyes study me for a moment before he nods.

Carefully, I reach out and touch his face. I brush my fingers across his cheek, marveling at the

silken texture of his skin. "Your skin is so smooth," I whisper more to myself than to him.

"Is that bad?" he asks.

"No. Just… different than I expected. May I touch your tail?"

He grins and lifts his tail toward me. Carefully, I trace the tips of my fingers over his scales and

find that they feel much like the rest of him. When I trace my fingers toward his tail fin, he carefully

lays it on my lap. The membrane is not as delicate as it appears; it is thick and tough like cartilage.

“Halla?” A voice calls from the hallway, and I recognize my brother. “Halla!”

I whip my head in the direction of the beach. “I’m all right!” I shout. “I’ll swim back to you!” I

turn to Errik. “It’s my brother, Gerold. I have to go.”

I start to pull myself back to the water but Errik call out. “Wait!”

I look back at him curiously. “What is it?”

“Will I see you again?”

I hesitate. “You… wish to see me again?”

A devastatingly handsome smile curves his lips. “Yes.”

I cannot help but smile in return. “All right.”

“Will you meet me here tomorrow?”

I nod.

“Tomorrow then,” he confirms. Without another word, he slips beneath the water and swims

away.

C H A P T E R 7

ERRIK

She was not afraid of me, and she agreed to meet me tomorrow. I cannot deny that this pleases

me greatly, for I wish to spend more time with her. I follow under the water to make sure she

reaches the shore safely. Though she is strong, there are creatures in the ocean that are

dangerous even to my kind.

As soon as she drags herself onto the beach, I swim back out to the rock, concealing myself as I

observe her.

I now know that the tall man I saw with her earlier is her brother, Gerold. I've heard much about

him. He is strong in his own right. In the days following the attack, I witnessed him organizing his

people to begin cleaning and rebuilding the city.

As soon as they disappear around the rocks toward their castle, I head back home. The sun is

already low on the water, and I'm sure Father is wondering where I've been.

I must conjure a good excuse before I arrive. If I must make one up on the spot, he'll easily detect

the lie. Father has always been skilled at reading people.

As I make my way back to the city, images of Halla flash through my mind. Her eyes are even

bluer than the sea and her hair is the color of flame. A strange yet lovely contrast of fire and water.

Several of my people swim past me when I enter the city. A few of the females cast appraising

glances my way, but I note that none of them are as lovely as Halla. She is the most beautiful female I

have ever seen. I wisht that she were Mer or that I was human. If only…

By the time I reach the castle, it is late. The golden glow of the L'sair crystals illuminates the

structure, lending an ethereal appearance to the palace and the city that surrounds it.

Many kingdoms lie beneath the sea—Toren and I have accompanied Father to almost all of them

—but none rival the beauty and majesty of Atena and its castle.

Tall towers of white and black pearl spiral toward the surface. They sparkle against the glowing

lights like shining beacons amidst the blue water. The many surrounding buildings are made of pearl,

as well, intricately carved with beautiful patterns. Groves of seaweed sway gently back and forth in

the calm waters as Mer children zip between them, playing games.

As soon as I enter the palace, Toren swims to me, a grim look on his face as he speaks through the

mind link. *"Father is angry. He's been searching for you all day."*

"What did you tell him?"

“Nothing. I said I could not find you.”

“Why was he searching for me? He normally does not care what I do.”

Toren shrugs. *“I do not know. He merely said it was important.”*

“Errik!” Father’s voice rings in my mind. He probably picked up on my presence through our

family bond since I am nearby.

“Coming, Father,” I reply dutifully.

Toren follows me toward the throne room. Sentries float on either side of the great doors. They

dip their chins in salute as Toren and I enter.

Father is seated on this throne at the far end of the hall, a thunderous expression on his face.

“Where have you been?”

“I was hunting,” I lie, the best I could come up with on short notice. *“Toren says you’ve been*

searching for me most of the day. Is something wrong?”

He narrows his eyes, most likely recognizing my lie for what it is, but he doesn’t challenge my

words. He swims toward me and places a hand on my shoulder. *“My son, I must speak with you*

about something important.”

“What is it?”

“I have found you a mate.”

My head jerks back. *“A mate? Why?”*

His brows pinch together as if my question were absurd. *“You are of age—twenty-five years old*

—and the heir to Atena. That is why. I have negotiated a betrothal between you and Princess

Luriel of the kingdom of Itlara. Your bonding will ensure peace between us, especially once you

produce an heir.”

“An heir?” I ask incredulously. *“Father, you cannot be serious. You cannot possibly think I’ll*

bond with a stranger.”

“She is a good match for you, Errik,” he states firmly. *“You will bond with her to unite our*

kingdoms.”

“No, Father. I will not. Besides, our kingdoms are already united with a peace treaty, are they

not?”

His nostrils flare as he glares at me. *“You know as well as I that treaties are not as strong as*

blood bondings.” I start to protest, but he waves his hand dismissively. *“Go. Do not speak anymore*

unless it is to tell me that you are not selfish and will put the needs of your kingdom above yours.”

His words are like a blade in my heart. I know that I have rebelled somewhat in the past, but I

have never done anything serious. In truth, I have tried my best to be a worthy, dutiful son. I have only

ever wanted his approval.

Dorin—Father's advisor and my mentor—purses his lips disapprovingly. *"Think on it, Errik.*

This betrothal would be good for you and our kingdom. Who knows? When you meet Luriel, your

fate markings may appear."

He is right. There is always a chance I could find my fated mate; perhaps it may even be Luriel. I

lower my eyes to the floor. *"I will consider it, Dorin."*

C H A P T E R 8

HALLA

W hen morning comes, I'm excited at the thought that I'll be meeting with Errik later. I

dreamed of him against last night. I reach up and gently touch my lips at the memory of

his mouth against mine. It was my first kiss. I know he only did it so that he could save

me, but I cannot stop thinking about it.

Gerold carries me downstairs for breakfast. As we sit across from one another, he tells me about

the progress that has been made on the modifications to the castle to accommodate my chair.

I listen half-heartedly, putting on my best cheery face because I know how hard he’s trying to

make things easier for me. But the thought of being bound to this chair forever is devastating.

As Gerold drones on, I glance at the grand staircase beyond the open double doors. We used to

slide down the bannisters when we were children. Althea was always after us to stop, but we would

continue anyway.

I stood at the top of those stairs in my most elegant dress and crown to greet Prince Edwyrd when

he came to Solwyck seeking my hand for a betrothal. We danced most of the night in celebration after

Father sealed the arrangement. I was not in love with him, but our conversation flowed well. In his

eyes, I could see a man would listen to me as his partner. I’d hoped that love might come later

between us, but I know now that it never will.

“Are you paying attention?” Gerold’s voice pulls me back from my thoughts.

I sigh. “Will you be able to put everything back the way it was if I regain full use of my legs

again?”

Sadness fills his expression. He reaches forward and takes my hand. “I pray each day in the

chapel that you will be able to walk again, Halla. But… we have to accept that it may not ever

happen."

I pull my hand away, clenching my jaw as I study him. The pity in his eyes is more than I can bear.

"You've already given up on me."

"Never," he denies. "I—"

"Yes, you have," I state firmly. "Just admit it."

He sighs heavily. "I have not given up hope that you may walk again, Halla. Why do you think I've

sent for Healers from all across the land? I've even begged other kingdoms, that are not our allies, for

their Healers as well." He shakes his head in frustration. "I'm doing it for *you*. I want to exhaust

every possibility before we just accept—"

"Accept what?" I ask, my tone sharper than I'd intended.

He sits back in his chair and scrubs a hand across his face. "Why do you do this?"

"Do what?" I shoot back.

"Take out your anger on me."

His words pierce my heart as sure as any dagger. My anger dissipates immediately, and I reach

for his hand again, squeezing it gently. "I'm sorry, Gerold. Forgive me. It's just—" my breath hitches.

“Sometimes I feel so helpless, and I hate that. I hate having to rely on others so that I can get around.”

“I know, my dear sister. I’m so sorry this happened to you. There is not a single day that I do not

wish it were me in your stead.” His eyes brighten with tears. “It should have been me, not you,

Halla.”

“Do not say that,” I tell him. “I love you and I would never wish to trade this with you, Gerold.” I

pause as my gaze drops to my legs. “I would not wish it on anyone.”

After breakfast, I make my way down to the shoreline. The ocean is calm today. The waves gentle and

rolling instead of turbulent like they were only a few days ago. Staring out at the crystal blue sea, I

breath deep of the crisp, salted air that blows in off the water.

I always loved the water. I used to live for days like this. I’d run along the beach and then dive

into the water to cool myself after. Althea used to tease that I was born part fish.

I cast my gaze out to a rock formation far in the distance. I used to challenge myself by swimming

to it. It would take every bit of my effort to make it there and then back again.

Clenching my jaw, I allow my gaze to drift over the sea. I curl my hands into fists at my side. I

have never backed down from a challenge and this will not be any different. Whatever it takes, I will

strengthen my body and I will walk again someday.

Carefully, I peel off my clothes, leaving me only in my undergarments. I push myself out of my

chair. For a moment, I wonder if I'll be able to stand. Instead, I drop to my knees on the pebbled

shoreline and drag myself into the water.

"Halla!" someone calls out, and I recognize Errik's voice right away. He swims up beside me.

"Your knees are bleeding. Why did you not wait for me to help you?"

"I'm fine," I tell him.

"Does it not hurt?"

"No." I hate that it doesn't pain me when I know it should. I change the subject. "How did you

know to meet me here so early?"

"I took a chance." He grins. "And I'm glad that I did."

He's so handsome and when he smiles, my cheeks flush with warmth.

He places two fingers up under my chin, tipping my face up to his. "What does this mean?"

"What?" I ask, not sure what he's talking about.

He brushes his thumb across my cheek. "This red coloring that blooms across your skin."

My face turns even redder. “It happens when we’re excited or nervous about something,” I

explain. “It can also happen when we’re attracted to someone.”

He studies me with an intense gaze. “Why do *you* turn this color now?”

“I’m excited to swim.” The lie burns my tongue. “That’s all.”

A gorgeous grin curves his mouth. “All right. Then, let’s go.”

He follows beside me as I do laps back and forth between the rock formation we met at yesterday

and the shore. I’m able to kick a bit with my legs, but not much. After a while, the muscles of my arms

begin to burn from the exertion.

I stop and turn so that I can float on my back. Errik mimics this, floating beside me. “Why do you

push yourself so much? Why not just enjoy swimming?”

I stare up at the clouds, watching the birds flying overhead. I point to them. “You see those

birds?”

“Yes.”

“I want to be free like that again.”

He turns his gaze to me, his brow creased slightly.

I continue. “I used to feel like I could do anything. But now… I just feel so weak sometimes. I

hate having to rely on others to carry me places that my chair cannot go. I just… want to be free and

strong again, Errik."

"You are strong," he says.

I turn to him. "No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are," he counters. "I have seen Mer who have lost the use of their tails after a back

injury. They still have the use of their arms, but… they give up. They refuse to swim anymore and

eventually just allows themselves to fade away." His eyes meet mine. "But you do not do this. You

have not given up. You are stronger than you realize, Halla."

"Not strong enough for some," I murmur, more to myself than to him.

"What do you mean?"

With a slight clench of my jaw I cast my gaze to the sky again. "My betrothed has rejected me

because of my… condition."

"Then, I say you are well rid of him," Errik states firmly.

My eyes snap to his.

"He doesn't deserve you."

A smile crests my lips. "Thank you, Errik."

Errik and I lay on our sides, facing each other in the sand. The small island rock formation providing

privacy from the rest of the world as we gaze out at the setting sun.

The last of its golden rays casting shimmering reflections across the water's surface in a dazzling

display. "I didn't realize it already so late," I tell him.

He smiles. "Neither did I." He rolls onto his back, folding his hands behind his head. "My

father's probably going to be furious when I get home. He hates when I'm out late and especially

when he finds out it's near the shoreline."

"What about your mother?" I ask.

His expression falls. "She died when I was a child. She and several others were trying to help a

ship that had been caught on the open sea in a storm."

I go still. "Was the ship called *The Queen's Pride*?"

"Yes, how did you—"

Tears fill my eyes. "My mother was on that ship. She died that day as well."

He reaches across and takes my hand. His palm smooth as silk as he squeezes it gently. "I am

sorry for your loss, Halla."

"And I'm sorry for yours too, Errik."

He lowers his gaze. "My father hates humans now because of what happened. He blames them for

her death.”

“My father felt the same about Mer,” I offer. “But my brother and I do not share his beliefs.”

A faint smile curls Errik’s mouth. “My brother and I do not share our father’s either.”

“You have a brother?”

“Toren. He is a few years younger than me, and not quite as handsome.” He gives me a teasing

grin. “Do you have more siblings?” he asks. “Or it is just you and your brother?”

“Just me and Gerold. He’s a few years older than me. We’ve always been close.” I pause. “I’m so

thankful I did not lose him that day too… when the dragon attacked the city.”

Still holding my hand, Errik brushes the pad of his thumb across my knuckles. “I am sorry about

your father, Halla.”

Emotions lodge in my throat, but I somehow manage to speak around them. “Thank you.”

“Halla!” Gerold calls out from the shoreline. “Where are you?”

“I’m here, Gerold!” I reply. “I’m coming back!”

I turn to Errik. “I have to go. Will I see you tomorrow?”

He flashes a gorgeous smile. “Yes.”

C H A P T E R 9

ERRIK

Iswim beneath the surface, keeping an eye on Halla as she makes her way back to shore. When

she reaches it, I watch as her brother helps her back into her chair. “You should not stay in the

water this later,” he gently chastises. “It’s cold; you might catch your death out here.”

Panic stops my heart. I had no idea this could happen. I make a mental note to make certain she

returns to the land far before sunset tomorrow. I do not want Halla to die.

As I make my way back to my home, I cannot stop thinking of her. I turn my open palm up,

studying it a moment and remembering the feel of her skin against mine.

I’m so lost my thoughts that I don’t notice my father is nearby until his voice booms in my head.

“Where were you?”

“Hunting,” I reply quickly. The only excuse I could come up with on short notice.

“Then, where is your catch for the day?”

“I was unsuccessful,” I tell him.

“Princess Luriel is coming here in two weeks to see you,” he says. *“Do not forget.”*

Reluctantly, I nod. *“I won’t, Father.”*

“Good.” He claps a hand on my shoulder. *“Now come join me and your brother for dinner. We*

waited for you.”

When I follow him into the dining hall, I take a seat next to Toren. We listen as father tells us

about his day.

After we’re done, Toren follows me to my room. He crosses his arms over his chest. *“Where*

were you really?”

I could lie, but I won’t. Not to Toren. *“With Halla.”*

His eyes widen. *“Are you mad?”*

“What’s wrong with spending time with her?”

“It’s dangerous,” he counters.

“Hall isn’t dangerous, Toren.”

“Not her,” he agrees. *“Others of her kind. Many of them are afraid of us. And fear can easily*

lead to hate.”

I sigh. *“You have nothing to worry about. I’m careful when I’m on the surface.”*

He claps a hand on my shoulder. *“I just worry for you. Besides, if Father finds out you’ve been*

spending time with a human, he’ll be furious.”

I shrug. *“Then… I will just make sure he does not find out.”*

Toren sighs. *“I do not think it will be that easy to hide it from him.”* He turns to go to his own

room, pausing at my door a moment. *“If you’re going to lie to him, at least think of a better excuse*

beside ‘hunting.’”

He’s right. If I’m going to continue spending time with Halla, I’ll need to think of a better excuse

for why I’m gone most of the day. The last thing I need is Father getting suspicious and investigating

where I am.

C H A P T E R 1 0

HALLA

It’s been almost a month since I started swimming every day with Errik. A light knock at my door

announces my brother, Gerold. He greets me with a smile, but I read the sadness in his eyes and

the stress in his posture. The city is still in ruins after the dragon’s fire, but the people are doing

their best to pick up the pieces and move on.

“How are things in the rest of the kingdom?”

Gerold slips one arm behind my back and another under my knees to carry me down to the dining

hall for the first meal. “They are as well as expected.”

His tone makes me worry. “What’s wrong, Gerold? You can tell me.”

He sighs as we make our way down the stairs. “I have good news and bad news.” I tense. “Which

do you want first?”

“The bad,” I immediately answer. I’ve always been one to face the grim truth head-on. “Then the

good.”

He sets me down at the table and pushes in my chair before he takes the seat across from me. He

must have terrible news because I notice that he stalls for time by offering me the toast and butter

before answering.

I push the food away and narrow my eyes. “You’re stalling, Gerold. Tell me.”

“The kingdom’s coffers are nearly empty.”

I blink at him, stunned. “But I thought—”

“The damage done by the dragon wrecked us, Halla. We’ve used much of what we had in reserve

to begin rebuilding. Because so many were affected, I cannot raise taxes on those who have already

lost so much.”

He’s right. “What are we going to do?”

He clenches his jaw and sits back in his chair. “I’ve received an offer.”

His tone makes me pause. I bring my tea to my lips and take a sip. “What kind of offer?”

“For your hand.”

Bewildered, I set down the cup, which clatters against the saucer. “Who? Do they—do they know

about my… condition?”

He nods. “It’s King Henrick of Arnafell. Their kingdom is wealthy. Marriage with him would—”

“Arnafell?” I straighten. “You cannot be serious, Gerold. I’ll freeze to death up there. I cannot

live in such a miserable place. Please tell me that is *not* the good news.”

He shakes his head. “It’s not.”

I collapse back in my chair. “Well, thank goodness for that. What is the good news, then?”

“I’ve heard word from the Fae. They have agreed to send a Healer.”

“They have?” I try but fail to temper the hope in my question.

“Yes,” Gerold replies. “This is a very big change from their usual stance toward humans. They

wanted nothing to do with us at all until recently.”

“I remember.”

His expression sobers. “About King Henrick… you do not have to accept him. I’ve heard he is a

sound leader and skilled in battle, but I’ve heard little else about him since he ascended to the throne

after his father’s death. We can always appeal to one of our allies to ask for a loan to rebuild if you

refuse Henrick’s offer.”

Gerold’s words are meant to be reassuring, but I hear what he does not say. *What if our allies*

refuse to help us?

I sit back, considering. I have always wanted only to serve our people and our kingdom. If

marriage to Henrick would help to rebuild, I do not know that I can refuse King Henrick simply

because I dislike the idea of living in the frozen north.

“What your plans for the day?” Gerold asks, ripping me from my thoughts. “Swimming again?”

I nod, then look down at my legs. Focusing all my efforts, I lift my left foot slightly, then my right.

Gerold gasps. “When did you discover you could do that?”

“A few days ago. I was able to kick a bit more in the water yesterday as well.”

He grins. “Althea was right. The water is doing you some good.”

My expression falls. “I just hope the Fae Healer can help with the rest.”

He takes my hand, squeezing it gently. “Me too.”

I open my mouth to tell him about Errik but stop. I’m not sure how my brother would feel about

me spending time with a Merman. I do not think Gerold would disapprove, but I’m not sure, and I

don’t want him to demand I stop spending time with Errik. I enjoy his company.

It’s more than that, even. I look forward to seeing him every day.

As I make my way down to the shore, I’m anxious to see him. I scan the water, searching for any

sign that he’s nearby. When I notice his glowing blue eyes in the distance, I smile and wave.

He waves back and swims toward me.

“You’re late,” he teases.

My heart flutters as his gaze holds mine and a devastatingly handsome smile curves his lips.

I lift my eyes to the sun. “No, I’m not. I’m early.”

We’ve been meeting for daily for almost a month. We swim for several hours every day as I

strengthen my upper body and do my best to move my legs to regain more function.

I remove my shirt and pants, leaving me in only my undergarments. No one ever swims along this

part of the shoreline, so I’ve never had to worry about discovery when I swim like this. Errik and I

are always the only ones our here.

He told me once that his people think nothing of nudity. That the Mer women only cover their

breasts because they hate the way land dwellers stares at them. However, I cannot help but notice

Errik’s eyes tracing my form now and then when thinks I am not looking.

I’d like to think that he finds me attractive, but it’s more likely that he finds me strange. He has

commented many times on the differences between me and a Mer.

I push off from my chair, and his strong arms catch me before I hit the rocky shore. His skin is

warm against mine, and my heart hammers as his mouth curves into a handsome smile.

“Careful,” he gently chastises. “We talked about this. It is not good for you to simply throw

yourself onto the ground.”

“I didn’t,” I reply with a grin. “I knew you would catch me.”

He laughs as he carries me into the water, cradling me to his chest with one arm while he uses the

other to push himself along the sand. I’ve heard that Mer are much stronger than humans, I believe it

now. He holds me as if I weigh nothing.

Once we enter the water, he releases his hold on me, and I already miss his arms around my form.

I arch a teasing brow at him. “I’m going to beat you today.”

He chuckles. “Is that so?”

“Yes.”

I glance over my shoulder at the rock island we usually swim to. We now call it *our* rock. Without

warning, I start toward it, making long strokes with my arms and trying my best to kick my feet behind

me in the process.

He swims beside me, his expression serious.

I try but fail to suppress a grin. I know very well that he can swim much faster than me, but he lets

me think I am making him work to beat me at this game we play every day. He's thoughtful, so I do not

call him on his ruse. Besides, I love swimming with him. This is the best part of my day—the time

that we spend together.

A ship catches my eye in the distance. The large white sail a stark contrast to the blue of the

ocean. My mouth drifts open when I notice the golden banner with a falcon crest waving in the breeze.

It's a Skallage ship.

Errik swims up beside me, following my line of sight. "Word has spread among the Mer to avoid

that ship," he says. "The males have been threatening to kill any of my people if we get too near."

"Why?"

"They say Prince Edwyrd's new bride is afraid we will try to drown them."

I still. "Prince Edwyrd?" Although I did not love him, his rejection of our betrothal after my

injury still hurt.

Errik’s hand cups my cheek, drawing my attention to him. “What’s wrong, Halla?” His glowing

blue eyes search mine in concern. “Why are you upset?”

“Prince Edwyrd was my betrothed,” I explain. “He’s the one who rejected me.”

Errik wraps his arms around me, pulling me close to his chest as we float in the water. “Oh,

Halla, I’m so sorry. He did not deserve your love. He—”

“I did not love him,” I answer quickly. “But his rejection made me feel…”

“Feel what?” Errik asks.

I lift my gaze to his. “I’d rather not talk about it. All right?”

Reluctantly, he nods.

C H A P T E R 1 1

ERRIK

A s I watch Prince Edwyrd’s ship sail away in the distance, anger roils deep inside me. He

was a fool to break off his betrothal to Halla. That he could so easily do this simply

because of her injury tells me that he would never have been worthy of her. If she were

mine, I would never let her go.

Ever since she saw his ship, she's been pushing herself harder than I've ever seen her do before.

She has swam several laps back and forth between the rocks and the shoreline, bringing her to the

point of exhaustion.

I watch her float on her back, staring up at the sky. Her chest rises and falls as she struggles to

catch her breath.

"Shall we go back?" I ask, concerned.

"Not yet. I want to do another lap."

I frown. "You push yourself too hard, Halla. You should rest."

Her blue eyes narrow. "You're just worried I'll beat you, aren't you?"

I laugh. "You've discovered the truth."

A wide smile splits her face. "I'm going to swim to that far rock formation, Errik. I think I can

make it."

My expression sobers. I know which one she is talking about; this rock lies very far out to sea.

The waves are much stronger there, and I worry she could be hurt.

"I do not think that would be wise."

"Why not?"

"We've been swimming for hours. You're exhausted. Your arms were already shaking when we

swam the last lap, and your legs—" I stop short. She hates when I mention her disability, but I know

that I must. "I do not think you will make it."

She narrows her eyes. "The first thing you should learn about me, Errik, is that I never back down

from a challenge."

I have obviously offended her, and I open my mouth to assuage her, but she turns and starts for the

rocks. I'm surprised by how quickly she can swim without the use of her legs. I doubt I'd be as fast if

I were unable to use my tail.

I join her, keeping pace. She grins at me as she slices her hands through the water in that strange

way humans help propel themselves forward while swimming. "Having a hard time keeping up?"

I arch a brow. "I am Mer. My body was made to move through the water. You'll have to do better

than that if you plan to beat me to the rocks."

To my complete and utter surprise, she accelerates. She still isn't swimming faster than me, but

her pace is impressive, nonetheless.

A giant wave rushes toward us, and she takes a deep breath and dives beneath the surface. When

she comes up on the other side, she draws in great gulping breaths of air.

I gaze at her in concern. “We should turn back, Halla.”

“No,” she snaps before diving beneath another wave.

I clench my jaw at her stubbornness. It’s going to get her killed someday.

I slip beneath the wave, watching her struggle to swim. Without the full use of her legs, her arms

must work harder to compensate, and it is easy to see that she is already tiring when we’re not even

halfway there.

When we surface, I request again, “We should go back.”

“No, I can make it, Errik. I know I can.”

Her face is set in a mask of determination as she presses on.

Another wave approaches quickly, and she dives, but not soon enough. The swell catches her, and

I watch in horror as she goes tumbling underwater.

She cries out, and a stream of bubbles escapes her mouth along with all of her air.

I pull her into my arms and seal my mouth over hers, breathing air into her lungs.

When I pull back, she studies me. Her scarlet hair rises around her head, swaying with the tide. I

gather her in my arms and swim to the surface. Her arms tremble with exhaustion as her hold

weakens.

I lean down and whisper in her ear, “It’s all right, Halla. You can relax. I’ve got you.”

She sags against me as I swim us back to our rock island near the castle.

Carefully, I carry her onto the shore. I prop us both against a rock to sit up. She is quiet, her gaze

fixed on the horizon across the sea. A tear slips down her cheek, but she quickly brushes it away.

I take her hand. “What is wrong?”

“Nothing,” she denies.

“Halla. Whatever it is, you can tell me. Is it Edwyrd? Is it because you saw his ship?”

She turns away, but even from this angle, I can see another tear roll down her cheek. “He rejected

me because of my condition, Errik.” Her voice quavers. “I thought I was getting stronger.”

I squeeze her hand. “You *are* getting stronger. Every day. I can see it.”

“Every day I keep hoping… praying that I’ll somehow be able to walk again, but I still cannot,

Errik. Prince Edwyrd didn’t want me because he thinks I’m broken… and I’m starting to believe that

he’s right.”

I gather her to my chest, holding her close as I run my fingers through the long scarlet strands of

her hair. I whisper in her ear. “You are not broken, Halla.” I pull back just enough to drop my

forehead gently to hers. “Edwyrd was a fool to reject you. You are the strongest, bravest, and most

beautiful female I have ever known. Any male who cannot see this, does not deserve you.”

I’m completely mesmerized as her blue eyes search mine. Her gaze drops to my mouth and my

heart hammer as she leans in. The warmth of her breath fans across my skin.

“Halla!” her brother calls out, startling us both.

She pulls back. “I have to go.” She starts to swim toward the shore, but stops and looks over her

shoulder. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

There is nothing I’d rather do more than see her again. Tomorrow, the day after… and every day

for the rest of my life. “Yes.”

C H A P T E R 1 2

HALLA

A s I make my way back to the shore, I find Gerold waiting for me beside my chair. I smile to

myself when I feel the barest hint of Errik’s fin brush against my arm. He thinks I don’t

know that he always escorts me back to the shore.

A small splash draws my attention and I see his tail emerge from the water and then disappear as

he dives back beneath the surface.

Gerold must notice it too because when he helps me into my chair, he arches a brow. “Was that a

Mer tail I saw just now?”

“Yes. His name is Errik. He’s been swimming with me.”

“Errik,” he repeats the name to himself as if committing it to memory. “Is this your mysterious

Merman that rescued you?” he asks teasingly.

I laugh. “Actually, he is.”

Gerold’s expression falls. “Well, why have I not met him yet? I would like to thank him for saving

my dear sister.”

“His people know that many of ours are afraid of them. So they try to avoid us… for the most

part.”

“Understandable,” he murmurs. His gaze slides to mine. “I have news to share with you.”

“What is it?”

“King Henrick will be arriving soon. He is coming to meet with you. To see if you might be

agreeable to marrying him.”

I turn to my brother. “Does he know I’m still unable to walk?”

Gerold nods.

“And… he still wants to marry me?”

“Yes.”

I blink at Gerold, stunned.

He takes my hand. “Not everyone is shallow like Prince Edwyrd.”

I give him a faint smile.

He continues. “Remember: you do not have to marry King Henrick if you do not wish. But… it

would not hurt to meet with him. If nothing else, perhaps he could become an ally. Besides being

known for how cold it is there, his kingdom is also known for its wealth.”

I swallow thickly and allow my gaze to sweep over our city as Gerold pushes my chair up the

path back to the castle. Everywhere there is still evidence of the damage wrought by the dragon. Our

people work tirelessly to rebuild, but our coffers are low. A marriage to Henrick would be a boon to

our kingdom.

It would also help us to fortify our defenses. It is known far and wide that our city has suffered

greatly. Gerold is constantly worried about the threat of pirates.

When I reach my room, I wheel myself out to the balcony overlooking the sea. I cast my gaze out

to the water. Silver moonlight shines down upon the waves, casting shimmering reflections across the

surface. The crisp saline breeze blows gently through my hair, and I sigh heavily as my thoughts turn

to Errik.

I wish I were Mer or that he was human. I almost kissed him today. I certainly wanted to. But

we're too different, he and I. A Mer and a human cannot be together. Not like that anyway. Besides…

why would he want me? Errik is the most handsome man I've ever seen; I'm sure he could have his

pick of beautiful mermaids.

I know it would be impossible between us, but I cannot help but dream.

C H A P T E R 1 3

ERRIK

W hen I reach the palace, I find Father and Toren waiting for me. Toren's eyes flash with

warning as I swim up to them.

Father narrows his eyes. "Where have you been?"

I could try to convince him I was hunting again, but it's an excuse I've already used too many

times. Sighing heavily, I offer him a half-truth instead. "I was meeting with someone."

He blinks several times, obviously stunned by my answer. "Who?"

Toren's eyes go wide and he shakes his head softly behind Father, trying to warn me against

telling him.

“A female,” I reply, intentionally vague.

Father’s brow furrows deeply. “Who?”

I shrug. “She is not from here. Her people live along the coast.” It’s not a complete lie. Halla *does*

live on the coastline.

Father studies me a moment, considering. “You are a prince, Errik. The heir to our kingdom.” He

places a hand on my shoulder. “If this were not so, I would not care who you choose to bond with.

But as the future leader of our people, you have… other things to consider.”

“Father, I—”

He raises his hands in a bid to allow him to continue. “An alliance with the kingdom of Itlana

would help ensure peace among our people for generations to come.”

“We already have peace with them, Father. We have a treaty.”

“Yes, but not one tied by blood. Their kingdom is strong, like ours. An alliance strengthened

through a bonding would ensure our kingdom is protected against any enemies.” He pauses. “Princess

Luriel will be here soon to meet with you.”

His gaze drops to my tail. “If you are blessed, perhaps your fate markings will begin to glow the

moment you meet her. That is what happened shortly after I met your mother. My tail did not glow

right away, mind you. But before it did, I knew, Errik. I knew your mother was my fated one."

He claps one hand on my shoulder and another on Toren's. "I pray that it will be so with you and

your brother as well." His gaze slides to mine. "Princess Luriel is intelligent, beautiful, and beloved

by her people. Even without the fate markings, I believe she would make an excellent match with

you."

My thoughts turn to Halla. I wish desperately that she could be mine. But she is human. It would

never work between us. Even so, I cannot stop the longing in my heart as I think of her.

When morning comes, I make my way back to the surface. I cannot stop thinking of my father's words.

I will have to meet with Princess Luriel soon. The thought fills me with dread.

I want Halla as my mate. No one else. I glance at my tail. But it's impossible.

As soon as I reach the shoreline, I notice her empty chair already on the beach. Panic stills my

heart as my gaze scans the water and do not see her.

"Halla!" I call out.

“Over here,” she replies, and I realize her voice is coming from the small island rock formation

we often sunbathe on.

I immediately swim toward it, surprised when I find her sitting up on the beach, her gaze fixed on

the water with a faraway look. “Halla?”

Her eyes meet mine, full of tears.

I drag myself up onto the sand, and move to her side. I take her hand in my own. “What’s wrong?”

“King Henrick of Arnafell has asked for my hand.”

My heart stutters and stops in my chest.

“He’s on his way here even now to propose.”

“Do you want to bond with him?” I ask, both anxious and fearful of her answer.

She shrugs. “I… do not know.”

I search her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Our kingdom has run out of money. The rebuilding has nearly emptied our treasury. Arnafell is a

wealthy kingdom, and King Henrick has offered to help us in exchange for my hand.” She looks down

at her legs. “He knows about my injury and he does not care. More than that though… he might be my

only chance at having children—a family.”

A deep ache settles in my chest. I cannot bear to think of her with another male. “Have you ever

even met him?”

“No. But I’ve heard that he is brave and very handsome.”

With great difficulty, I manage to suppress the snarl rumbling my chest.

She turns to me, her blue eyes searching mine. “What do you think I should do?”

I don’t want her to bond with King Henrick. I want her to be mine. However, I cannot tell her this.

She is human and I am… not. It would never work. So, instead, I force a platitude past my lips. “You

should do whatever you believe will make you happy.”

She lowers her gaze, and her expression is one I recognize as disappointment, but I do not

understand why.

“Errik, I—”

“Errik!” Toren calls out, startling us both.

I whip my head toward my brother, and so does Halla. He swims closer, and I notice she moves

behind me, her hands on my shoulders.

I glance back at her. “It is only my brother, Toren.”

Her cheeks flush deep red. “But I’m half-naked, Errik.”

Her words make me wonder. She's never had a problem undressing in front of me. Why now my

brother? "Nudity is not—"

"Frowned upon among your people. I know. But it is for mine."

My heart stutters and stops. She is reacting this way because she trusts me and only me to see her

partially clothed. My chest swells with pride at the thought. I tip my chin up high as my brother

approaches.

His eyes widen when he notices her behind me.

"Toren," I begin. "This is Halla. Halla, this is my younger brother, Toren."

"It is nice to meet you." He dips his chin in greeting.

"You too," she replies.

He shifts his gaze to me pointedly. "Father is looking for you."

"I will be there shortly. First, I must escort Halla back to shore."

He purses his lips. "Do not take long. If he discovers you here, he'll be angry."

I nod, and Toren swims away.

Halla places a hand on my forearm, drawing my attention to her. "I'll be fine, Errik. You should

go before you get in trouble."

I don't want to leave her, but I also know I must speak with Father. If do not go to him now, he

might find me here. He'll be furious if he does.

Hearing Halla speak of King Henrick made me realize something. I cannot bond with Princess

Luriel. I cannot offer myself to her when my heart already belongs to Halla. I love Halla. Even if she

can never be mine, I cannot bind myself to another.

"Will I see you tomorrow?" she asks.

"Yes." I take both her hands in mine as I stare deep into her lovely blue eyes. "I will be here."

She nods, and I watch her return to shore. I curl my hands into fists at my side as devastation and

jealousy war within me. She should be mine, not King Henrick's. Why was I cursed to be Mer? Why

could I not have been human like her? I could have asked her to bond with me then. To be my mate

and remain by her side forever.

Arnafell lies across the sea. Thick islands of floating ice surround the kingdom most of the year,

making travel and even swimming treacherous. If she marries King Henrick, I'll never see her again.

As I make my way home, I cannot stop thinking of her words. She wants a family—children. Even

if she somehow wished to be with me, I do not think I could give her this. We are two different

species. I’ve never heard of a Mer having a child with a human. Yes, there are rumors and myths, but

that is all they are. I doubt such a pairing is even possible. If it were… could it result in healthy

children?

I look down at my mating pouch. I’ve seen enough human men to know our male anatomy is

similar. Theirs is always protruding however, whereas ours only protrudes from our body when we

are ready to mate. My stav is a bit larger and thicker than a human’s, but that does not mean—

“Errik,” a familiar voice calls, startling me.

I turn to find Dorin—father’s advisor—swimming toward me. He places a hand on my arm, the

corners of his eyes crinkling as he smiles at me. “Princess Luriel is here. She is anxious to meet you.”

I lower my gaze. “I have decided that I cannot—”

He raises his hands in a placating gesture. “Before you do anything rash, Errik… This is merely a

meeting. I’m sure she’s curious to know if you may be a fated match. That is all.”

I sigh heavily. I want Halla and no other. But I do not know how it could possibly work between

us. Deep down, part of me hopes that Luriel and I are fated. Then I would know for certain that Halla

is not meant to be mine, even though every instinct insists otherwise. My stubborn heart refuses to

give up despite our differing species.

“All right. Take me to her.”

Besides, my fate marks have not glowed since I’ve met Halla.

I turn to Dorin. “The fate marks… Father said his did not appear for my mother right away. Is it

common for there to be a delay?”

He nods. “Most often, the bond starts with a knowing deep within. Your soul recognizes its other

half before the fate marks appear.”

Hope fills me. “Has this ever happened with someone… outside of our species?”

He stops and turns to me with a wary expression. “Why do you ask this?”

I’m not ready to tell him the truth just yet. “I’m simply curious. I’ve heard rumors all my life and

wondered.”

He clenches his jaw. “The last pairing I heard of happened many years ago. It was… terrible. The

man killed himself not long after the child was born.”

Last pairing? Child? My heart stutters. “Tell me what happened.”

“You must tell no one.” He narrows his eyes. “I’m not entirely sure how you even heard rumors,

but you must not repeat them. We hide such stories to discourage others from following this path. Do

you understand?”

Numbly, I nod.

“Many years ago, a Merman fell in love with a human woman. He claimed that they were fated.

They had a child born with human legs.”

“And the child was healthy?” I demand anxiously.

He nods. “However, neither the child nor the mother could be with the Merman. After a time, they

grew apart, and… the woman moved on, taking the child with her. The man killed himself not long

after. He could not bear being parted from his mate and his daughter.”

“What happened to the child?”

“We do not know. She may not even know *what* she is,” he explains. “That is why we do not

speak of this, Errik. Humans are not like us. They do not mate for life. We do not want to encourage

any Mer to follow this example.”

I understand why he and my father have kept this secret. However, instead of discouraging me, the

story has had the opposite effect. It has given me hope where I had none before.

Now, I no longer dread my meeting with Luriel, for I already know in my heart that she is *not* my

fated one. Halla is.

When I walk into the throne room, I find her floating before my father. She turns to me with a

charming smile. Her golden hair fans around her head like a glowing halo and her lavender eyes

appraise me. I greet her warmly but feel nothing. No attraction, nor pull of my soul to hers in any way.

Our meeting has only deepened my conviction. Halla is meant to be mine. I am certain of it. Now,

I just need to find out if she feels the same way.

C H A P T E R 1 4

HALLA

A ll night, I dreamed of Errik. I cannot stop thinking about him and our conversation

yesterday. When I asked him what I should do about King Henrick, he merely advised me to

do what makes me happy.

Sadness settles in my chest. Errik must not have feelings for me like I thought he might. If he did,

surely he would have said something. If our situations were reversed, I believe I would have, at least.

Then again, maybe not. We spend time together every day, but I’ve never told him how I feel.

Deep down, I fear he would only reject me. I am human, not Mer. And, why would he want me when I

am broken?

King Henrick, however, does not seem deterred by my condition.

The first of the sun's rays filter in from the balcony as Gerold walks into my room. He greets me

warmly. "King Henrick has just arrived. His ships were seen down at the docks. You should dress

quickly; I will send for you once he is here."

I'm so nervous, I can hardly think. The man who may be my future husband is here. Compulsively,

my thoughts return to Errik. I wish that I were Mer, or that he were human. I love him, but a

relationship would be impossible for us. Besides, I doubt he would ever return my affections. And if I

truly care about my people and our kingdom, I will push aside my selfish desires for a man I could

never possibly have, and do what is best for them.

I bathe and then dress. Althea comes in to check on me as she does every morning and night.

She takes hold of the sole of my left foot. "Push as hard as you can against me, Halla."

I grit my teeth and concentrate all my energy and effort on my task. My body is slow to respond

but eventually obeys. After I exercise the other foot, her lips quirk up in a faint smile. “There is some

improvement, Halla.”

“But not much.” I voice the words she does not.

She nods, taking my hand and squeezing gently. “The Fae have many methods of healing. Once

they send their Healer, I have great hope that they will be able to help you, Halla.”

“At least King Henrick does not seem to care if I am whole or not,” I say, trying to find the bright

spot in all of this suffering. “That bodes well, does it not?”

She smiles. “Yes, it certainly does.”

“Althea, you have traveled far and wide, have you not?”

She nods.

“Have you ever—” I stop short, uncertain how to ask what I want. Drawing in a deep breath, I

force the words past my lips. “Have you ever heard of a human bonding to a Mer?”

Her eyes snap up to mine and her expression falters. “Why do you ask this?”

“I… was simply curious,” I lie. “That’s all.”

She sits on the edge of the bed, clasping her hands tightly together in her lap as she straightens.

Her gaze meets mine evenly. “I have heard of this. But, as far as I know, such pairings do not end

well.”

“What do you mean?”

“One trapped by the sea and the other forced to live on land.” Something akin to sadness flashes

briefly behind her eyes. “How could such a bonding ever withstand that kind of permanent

separation? It would be doomed to fail from the start, Halla.” Her gaze holds mine. “Do you

understand?”

I swallow against the lump in my throat. “Yes.”

“Come now.” She forces a cheery smile to her face. “Let us go meet this King Henrick. I have

heard he is a good man.”

I’m anxious, and I don’t like the idea of waiting in my room. So, instead of waiting for Gerold to

come back and help me, I wheel myself to the door and push down my pride as I ask one of the guards

to carry me down the stairs to the throne room, where I know Gerold will be receiving King Henrick.

As soon as the guard carries me through the doorway, Gerold’s lips tip up in a smirk. “I knew

you’d be down here as soon as you were dressed.”

The guard gently helps me into my chair, and I wheel myself to Gerold's side. I'm too nervous to

conjure a witty reply or joke. I push my hands into my lap, wringing the fabric of my dress as I try but

fail to calm my nerves.

"Is this what you do all day? Sit here and do nothing?" I cannot help but tease him.

"What are you talking about?" He laughs. "I'm rarely in this room. I'm only here now to wait for

your suitor's arrival. For *you*, I might add."

"For us," I remind him.

He frowns, the mood between us somber now. "You know you need not do anything you do not

wish. Please tell me that you understand that, my dear sister."

"I do," I reply, thankful that I have a brother who loves me more than he loves wealth. "Even if I

refuse his hand, we can still ask him for help."

Gerold nods, but it is easy to read the fatigue in his expression. The weight of the entire kingdom

rests on his shoulders. I cannot imagine how terrible a burden it must be. "I know we should, but I do

not know how," he admits. "I am dreading it, to be honest. I feel like I've failed our people, Halla."

It is rare that my brother is not in a teasing or joking mood. He must be deeply worried that he is

not a good king if he is admitting his fears aloud.

He continues. “The dragon’s attack has left us vulnerable. Whatever cannons were not destroyed,

their munitions have almost all been spent.”

“Can we still defend the city against pirates?”

“No,” he replies soberly. “That is what keeps me awake at night. We never needed to worry about

an attack before, but now that we are weak, I fear it is only a matter of time before they come to prey

on us.”

I cannot deny that this news unnerves me. No wonder my brother appears so worn of late.

I take his hand, drawing his attention back to me. “You are a wise, fit ruler, Gerold. I know that

you work every day to help with the cleanup and oversee the reconstruction of this city. It is not your

fault that the dragon came, but you are doing everything you can to restore Solwyck to the best of your

abilities. Anyone with honor will recognize this. If they are truly our friends and allies, they will

understand that you are asking not because you failed as a king, but because you are humble enough to

seek aid for your people.”

A ghost of a smile curls his lips. “Did I ever tell you that you give wise council, my dear sister?”

“Never.” I grin. “But you may start now.”

C H A P T E R 1 5

HALLA

One of the guards enters, interrupting our conversation. He bows low. “Forgive me, Your

Highnesses, but King Henrick has arrived.”

My heart slams in my throat. I push my hands into my lap to still their shaking as I tip my

chin up to receive our most welcome guest.

“Show him in,” Gerold orders.

The doors open, and my mouth drifts open as King Henrick appears. He is indeed as handsome as

they say. He has a proud, square jaw that could cut glass, and blond hair—the color so light it appears

almost white, piercing blue eyes, and a tall, broad-shouldered physique. His body is heavily muscled.

Despite his attractiveness, he cannot rival Errik. Helplessly, I wish he were somehow here.

My brother stands to greet him. “Welcome, King Henrick. I am King Gerold, and this is my sister,

Princess Halla. We are glad you have arrived safely.”

“Thank you. I am happy to be here.” King Henrick dips his chin in a subdued bow. His eyes snap

to me, and I still as he pins with an intense gaze. He walks toward me and drops to one knee.

“Forgive my directness, Your Highness, but you are more beautiful than I was told.”

I smile, pleasantly surprised by his words. “Thank you.”

His gaze drops to my legs. “All have heard of your bravery. It is a shame you are now broken.”

My head jerks back at his blunt words. “I…” I trail off, unsure of how to respond.

He continues. “Perhaps my Healers can examine whether anything can be done.”

“I… would appreciate that, my Lord,” I reply, trying to be polite.

We go to the dining hall, offering him and his staff refreshments after a long journey. Henrick sits

across from me. I’m surprised when the food arrives and he rests his arms on either side of his plate,

along with the rest of his men.

Instead of using the cutlery provided, they all use their hands, tearing into their food and eating

loudly. Gerold’s eyes dart to mine.

Henrick lifts his gaze to me and smiles before shoving another oversized mouthful of bread in his

mouth. Using his other hand, he rips off a piece of steak with his teeth, that appear strangely sharp—

almost like fangs.

I glance down at my fork and knife and begin politely cutting into my food. I do not want to be

rude, so I pretend that his way of eating is not strange to me. Gerold does the same.

Henrick's eyes dart to me then my brother. "I like what I see. My offer still stands. I will give you

the wealth to rebuild Solwyck in exchange for your sister's hand."

Gerold faces me. "The decision is not mine, Your Highness. It belongs to Halla."

Henrick's brow furrows deeply. "Fine. Let us spend time together this evening after dinner." His

blue eyes study me. "You may ask me whatever you wish, Princess. I am an open book."

"Thank you." I smile politely. "You may do the same."

Once dinner is over, I wheel into the garden while Henrick follows beside me. The gardens

overlook the ocean. They are lovely, dotted with flowering bushes carrying vibrant red-and-blue

flowers. I love the long, trailing green vines with tiny purple glowing blossoms most. They drape

over the garden walls, swaying in the breeze like living curtains. They were planted by my mother,

and I am once again glad that these gardens were spared from the dragon's fire.

Henrick walks beside me, studying the many wide, flat stones Gerold has had placed along the

path for my chair to maneuver easily.

“I can have the castle fitted with whatever you need to move with your chair,” he says. “I will do

all that I can to make your life easier.”

Surprised by his thoughtful words, I thank him.

He nods. “It is the least I can do.”

I stop and turn to face him. “You are so certain you want me, Your Highness?”

His gaze rakes over my form, and he nods firmly. “I need a future queen and someone to carry my

heirs. You are lovely. Despite your broken body, I assume you may still be bred.”

My eyes widen, and my breath hitches in my throat. “Your… Highness?” I hedge, wondering if

I’ve heard him wrong. “Did you ask if… I can be *bred*?”

“Yes,” he replies.

“Like a horse?” I ask, agitation seeping into my tone.

He clasps his hands behind his back and cocks his head to the side. “Forgive me. You find my

manner of speaking blunt, I assume.”

“Yes.”

“It is my way—the way of the north. Life is hard in the ice and snow, and we do not have time for

flowery words or flattery.” He pauses. “Will this be a problem for you?”

“I—” I stop short, uncertain of how to reply. “What about love?” I finally ask. “Is there any place

for such emotion in the northern lands?”

His gaze holds mine for a moment before he responds, “I will be completely honest with you,

Princess. Will that be acceptable to you?”

“Of course. Please, continue.”

He takes a seat on a bench beside me, studying me for a moment. “You are known for your

intelligence, Princess Halla. A quality very valuable to have in one’s mate. And you are even more

beautiful than the rumors I have heard. I have lands, ships, a castle, wealth, but I lack a wife. I cannot

give you love, but I vow that I will never lie to you.

“I understand that many princes and kings have affairs, but that is not my way. I promise I will

provide you with a good home and whatever you desire. I ask only in return that you rule by my side,

give me at least two heirs, and never deny me your bed. Is this acceptable to you?”

He must recognize the hesitation in my eyes because he adds, “I know your kingdom’s coffers are

nearly empty. I would give your brother whatever he needs and more to rebuild Solwyck, but only in

exchange for what I ask—your hand.”

He pauses to let his words sink in. “I doubt you will receive a better offer considering your

situation, Princess. You are beautiful, but your body is not whole. I understand politics, and I know

that if not for the dragon fire and your accident, you would never even consider me. Yet I promise you

that our kingdom will be ruled wisely. I do not allow feelings to get in the way of logic; that is what

makes me a good ruler.” He stands. “Think about what I have said.”

He starts to turn away but stills as if thinking better of it. He takes my hand, and I’m in too much

shock at his words to pull away. He brings my hand to his mouth and presses a chaste kiss on the

back.

His blue eyes search mine. “I suspect you appreciate affectionate gestures. I will try to remember

this in the future if you wish.” He dips his chin. “We will speak again in the morning.”

As he walks away, I’m left gaping. I’ve never been spoken to so bluntly. While I appreciate

honesty, I’ve never realized how important the simple niceties between people are until now. When

you strip away the little things, you are left with only the hollow darkness of… nothing but stark and

hard truth.

That is what I sense in his eyes. No cruelty, no malice, no kindness or gentleness there. Simply

truth. No emotion.

Can I really spend the rest of my life with a husband who speaks without passion and wants me

only for the heirs I can bear? A man who thinks nothing of telling me that I am broken?

My thoughts turn to Errik. I wish he were here. I miss his shining eyes, his bright smile when he

sees me, his kind words, and the way he touches me so carefully and so tenderly when he helps me to

and from my chair.

Why can he not be a human? Why can I not be a Mer?

Tears sting my eyes and blur my vision. I'm too upset to call for one of the guards to carry me up

the stairs to my room. I don't want anyone to see me like this.

It's not as if King Henrick is cruel; he is simply blunt and honest. So why am I crying? Why am I

so devastated? Though Gerold assured me I do not have to marry him, King Henrick was right. What

other offers will I have?

None.

If I want to do what's best for the people of Solwyck, I will marry him, and he will give Gerold

whatever he needs to rebuild our kingdom. The people will have food and all that they desire.

Solwyck can become a bright and shining city once again.

I make my way toward the sea. Stripping off my dress, I push out of the chair and drag my body

into the water. It is dark, and the moon is only half full, but it casts enough light to guide my swim to

the rocky island—mine and Errik's. I drag myself onto the hard stone and sand, and curl up on my

side.

Errik's image resurfaces in my mind, and I cannot stop crying because I know he can never be

mine. A broken sob escapes me, the sound swallowed by the wind, as I cry my anguish to the stars.

C H A P T E R 1 6

ERRIK

A ll night, my thoughts kept returning to Halla. I cannot stop thinking about her proposal from

King Henrick. I can hardly stand the mere thought of another man touching her.

I want her to be mine. I do not care if she is human; I love her, and I am desperate to tell

her.

It is difficult to remain here when I want to leave and find Hallas as soon as possible. But, I

understand that relations between our kingdom and Luriel's are important. I cannot risk offending

them by leaving before we have breakfast. I'm already risking offense by planning to refuse Luriel's

hand.

As soon as I'm able to leave, I head for Solwyck. When I break through the surface by the shore, I

catch a faint hint of Halla's scent on the breeze.

Flaring my nostrils, I follow the trail to our rock where we swim every day. A broken sob is

quickly swallowed by the wind. It stills my heart, for I know it is Halla.

I rush toward her, swimming as fast as I can. When I reach the rock, my heart slams against my

ribs. She is curled up on the surface, crying.

I pull myself toward her and gather her into my arms. "Halla? What is wrong?"

Her blue eyes turn to me, brimming with despairing tears.

I brush the hair back from her face and cup her chin. "Are you hurt?" I ask, panicked when she

does not answer right away.

"No." Her voice quavers. "I am broken."

"What are you talking about?"

“That’s what *he* said.”

“Who?”

“King Henrick,” she murmurs. “He said I was broken, and that no one will want me but him. He

will give Gerold whatever he needs to rebuild Solwyck, but only if I marry him.” She draws in a

deep breath. “How can I refuse him when he will help our people?”

Anger heats my core. She is as selfless as she is brave to even consider bonding to a man who

would speak so cruelly to her just for the sake of her people.

“How can I be selfish and say no if—”

“Don’t marry him, Halla. If you need wealth, why did you not say so?”

She blinks up at me.

“Do you know how much treasure lies at the bottom of the sea? My people have no use for it. We

do not trade in coins or fine jewels. My brother and I will bring all you need and more.” I comb my

hand through her hair and press a tender kiss to her forehead. “Do not marry a man who would speak

to you this way. He does not see you for what you are.”

She studies me. “What am I?”

“You are intelligent, brave, beautiful, and strong. Where others would have given up, you

persevere, fighting to regain what you have lost. In doing so, you have become so much stronger,

Halla. You are the fiercest person I know." I touch her cheek. "Any man who cannot see this does not

deserve your hand."

I drop my forehead to hers and stare deep into her lovely blue eyes. "I have wished many times

that I were human, Halla. If I were, I would ask you to be mine, and if you accepted me, I would

never let you go. I love you, Halla, but I do not expect you to return my affection." I close my eyes

against the pain. "Please, I cannot bear to think of you accepting another man, especially one who

does not deserve you."

She touches my cheek. "You love me?"

I stare deep into her luminous blue eyes. "More than anything, Halla. I wish so desperately that I

were human."

She leans in and brushes her lips against mine in a featherlight touch. I draw in a shaking breath as

she whispers against them, "It doesn't matter to me if you are Mer and I am human. I love you too,

Errik."

I pull her into my arms and run my hand through her long, red hair, gripping the silken strands

between my fingers. I tip her head up and capture her mouth in a claiming kiss.

C H A P T E R 1 7

HALLA

Errik claims my mouth in a passionate kiss that steals the breath from my lungs. His lips taste

like ocean and sunlight.

He wraps his arms around me and rolls me beneath him. I'm wearing only my silken

undergarments. He traces his hand down my bare form and cups my breast.

I moan as he brushes the pad of his thumb over the peak. He moves down my body and grips the

hem of my bra, pulling it down to free my breasts. He closes his mouth over the already stiff peak of

my left breast and rubs his palm over the other. He is careful of his claws as he touches me.

The soft scrape of his teeth across my nipple makes me gasp, sending ripples of pleasure straight

to my core. I thread my fingers through his hair, holding him in place.

His body is made of thick layers of muscle, and I love the weight of his body over mine.

I do not have full sensation in my lower body, but I feel enough to register something hard, warm,

and slick across my inner thigh. I gasp when it presses between my folds, and I realize it is his

manhood. Only the thin fabric of my underwear separates us.

He pulls back sharply. “Forgive me,” he breathes. “I—”

I grip the back of his neck and pull his lips back down to mine. “It’s all right. I want you, Errik.”

He crushes his lips to mine and rolls his hips against me. The delicious, warm heat of his length

rests between us. I reach down to wrap my hands around him, surprised that he is so large, my fingers

do not quite reach. His length is textured with several small bumps of flesh that secrete some sort of

clear viscous fluid, making him feel slick against my palm.

I glance down to study him. Althea told me about human men, and I do not believe they look like

this.

He brushes the hair back from my face. “You find my stav strange.” I hear the concerned question

in his tone.

“No,” I breathe. “Just different. But not in a bad way, Errik.”

He grits his teeth as I gently stroke his length.

He trails his hand up my inner thigh. He pulls my underwear to one side then drags his fingers

through my already slick folds.

I moan when they brush over the hooded pearl of flesh at the top. Encouraged by my response, he

continues to tease his thumb over my sensitive flesh and gently inserts one finger into my core. At

first, the pressure feels tight and uncomfortable, and my body needs a moment to relax. Once I do, he

inserts another finger, gently pumping into me.

I've touched myself before, but it's never felt like this. Every nerve is hypersensitive.

I continue to stroke his stav. His length presses against my inner thigh. He is so close to where I

want him, but I don't want him to stop what he's doing. It feels amazing.

A spark of heat flares inside me as pleasure coils tightly in my core. I'm so close to the edge, and

I think he is, too. His stav grows even slicker in my grasp.

"Errik," I barely manage to breathe through my pleasure. "Please."

I'm not even sure what I'm asking for, but he begins to quicken the pace of his fingers inside me.

Every muscle in my body tenses, then I'm coming harder than I ever have as pleasure roars like fire

through my veins.

I cry out his name. His stav pulses in my hand and against my thigh as he comes, warm fluid

erupting onto my body for what seems like forever. When I look down, my skin is covered in his

essence, the blue fluid warm and sticky.

He moves to one side, pulling me with him. His stav is still a hard bar between us. It seems what

Althea told me about human men needing time to recover after their climax does not apply to the Mer.

Errik's blue eyes study me as we lie in each other's arms. Illumination in the corner of my eye

catches my attention, and I look down. "Your tail, Errik. It's glowing."

His mouth drifts open. The blue light is beautiful against his matching scales. "I was right," he

breathes.

"What do you mean?"

"Mer tails only glow when we find our fated mates." He lifts his gaze to me and smiles. "You are

mine, Halla. I knew it deep in my soul." He captures my mouth in a claiming kiss. When he pulls

back, he drops his forehead gently to my own and runs his fingers through my long scarlet hair. "You

are my fated one. I long to bind you to me, Halla, and claim you as my mate."

I want more than anything to be his, but I'm just a bit nervous.

Sensing my hesitation, he cups my chin, tipping my face up to his. "What is wrong?"

"It's just… I've never done this before. I've heard it can be painful the first time."

He presses a tender kiss to my lips. “We do not have to do anything you do not wish. You love me.

That is enough, Halla. I would never ask you for anything you would not give.”

I nestle into his embrace and after a while, I drift off to sleep in his arms.

C H A P T E R 1 8

ERRIK

A s she lies sleeping in my arms, myriad thoughts flit through my mind. I must give her my

kiss and take her to my father. Surely, he will accept her when he finds out she is my fated

one.

I must go to him as soon as possible. He is still praying that I will agree to a betrothal with Luriel,

so I must quickly dispel him of this false hope. Now that I have found my fated one, he cannot argue

against my reasoning.

If he refuses to give me his blessing, so be it. I will not give up Halla.

As I hold her to my chest, I am already imagining our future. I’ve never been happier. However,

as the sun begins to set, casting long streaks of pale orange and gold across the water, I know she must

return to the castle. It is only a matter of time before her brother starts looking for her, and I do not

believe she wants to be discovered like this.

My gaze travels down her form. I cannot contain the fierce possessiveness that fills me as she

snuggles even closer. My nostrils flare, as I breathe deeply of our combined scent. She is mine. It

matters not what my father says. I will not give her up.

C H A P T E R 1 9

HALLA

“Halla?” Errik’s voice is low in my ear. “You must wake up.”

My eyes snap open, and I stretch my body against him. He wraps his arms tighter around me and

presses a tender kiss to my lips. “There are things I must do,” he whispers softly. “But I will meet you

back here again tomorrow, my beautiful Halla.”

I love the way he calls me his. “If I am yours,”—I reach up and touch his cheek—“then you are

mine.”

His glowing blue eyes study me as he cups my chin and gently brushes his thumb across my lips.

“I have always been yours, Halla.”

When he takes me back to shore, I quickly pull my dress back on, and he helps me back into my chair.

Gripping the handrails, he lifts himself and seals his mouth to mine in a tender kiss full of promise.

I watch him leave before I start up the ramp for the castle. I’m almost to the top when I hear

someone calling out for Errik.

I return to shore and immediately recognize his brother. As soon as he sees me, he swims toward

me. I’m struck again by how similar he is to Errik. I would know they were brothers even if I’d never

met him before.

“Errik just left a few minutes ago.”

Another Mer with swims up beside Toren. His glowing green eyes widen slightly as they meet

mine before narrowing. “Who is—”

“This is Princess Halla,” Toren tells him. “She is a… friend of Errik’s. Halla,”—he gestures to

the Merman—“this is Haldran.”

His expression softens. “It is an honor to meet you, Princess.”

I give him a polite smile. “And you as well.”

Toren turns to him. “She said that Errik just left recently.”

Haldran dips his chin in a subtle bow. “This is good news, my Prince. Perhaps he is already on

his way back to your father. We should return as well, then. The King wanted to announce the royal

engagement as soon as possible.”

“Royal engagement?” I ask, confused.

“Yes,” Haldran smiles. “It is glorious news. Prince Errik is to bond with Princess Luriel of

Itlana.”

I blink at him. “Errik is engaged?”

Toren’s eyes meet mine, concern evident behind them. “It is not official yet and he has not agreed

to—”

“He never even told me he was a prince.” Pain settles deep in my chest, and I feel as if I can

barely breathe. “He lied to me.”

“Halla, he—"

“It’s all right, Toren.” I struggle to keep my voice even. “I’m glad I found out. It’s better that I

know. Thank you for telling me.”

Devastation fills me, but I force myself to blink back my tears as I start back to the castle.

“Halla, wait!” Toren calls out, but I keep going, afraid that if I turn back I’ll be unable to hold

back my sadness.

My pain is too raw right now, and I don’t want to cry in front of him. Anger wars with sadness. I

thought Errik loved me as I love him, but I was wrong.

As I make my way back up the ramp to the castle, I’m surprised to find King Henrick waiting for

me in a courtyard. I quickly brush away the tears on my cheeks. “King Henrick, I did not expect to see

you this early.”

His expression is grim. “You’re in love with a Merman.”

I cast about for a suitable reply before I realize that this man does not mince words. He is as blunt

as he is honest, so I decide I will be the same. “I thought I was, but—”

“I overheard. He is engaged, and judging by the tears in your eyes, it was a shock to you. Am I

correct?”

Gritting my teeth, I nod.

He studies me with a piercing blue gaze and an expression I cannot quite discern. After a moment,

he steps closer. “Then what is holding you here? Why not marry me and let me take you far from this

place? The Mer do not stray as far north as Arnafell, and you won’t have to ever see him again.”

My brow furrows. “It does not bother you that I—”

He shakes his head. “No. As long as you pledge to be faithful to me after we’re wed, I’ll not hold

any prior lovers against you.” He takes my hand. “I am truly looking for an intelligent woman to be by

my side and give me heirs. I will be faithful to you and give you whatever you want. I'm only asking

you to rule Arnafell with me and help me raise our children. I do not expect to win your heart, only

your hand and your pledge to remain at my side."

I open my mouth to speak, but he continues unencumbered.

"You are beautiful, and it is easy to see you are possessed of great intelligence. I do not care if

you're broken. I still want you as my wife and future queen if you will give me your hand."

This man is impossible. He speaks the truth, no matter how blunt. However, I suppose that is an

asset here. I can believe he is truly not angry and likely will not hold my rejection against me.

"I appreciate your honesty, even if it is hard to hear some of the words that leave your mouth."

For the first time since I've met him, his lips tip up in a faint smile. "Aye, I've been told that many

times. I cannot help it; I was raised this way."

I arch a brow. "I believe I am beginning to understand that." I clear my throat. "However… love

is important to me, Henrick. I do not think I can live my life without it, to be honest."

He studies me for a moment. "So that is a refusal, then, of my offer?"

"I believe it must be," I reply.

He draws in a deep breath and takes my hand again. “If you change your mind, my offer will still

stand.”

He starts to walk away but stops. Slowly, he turns back to face me with a question. “Are you not

going to ask me to lend aid to your kingdom?”

I shake my head. “You made it very clear that you would only help if I agreed to marry you.”

He smiles. “You see? That’s why I like you. We are the same. You do not play games nor try to

manipulate others.” His lips quirk up in another rare smile. “I will help your kingdom anyway.”

My head jerks back. “You will?”

“Aye. Who knows? Maybe you’ll look favorably upon me and decide you want me after all.” He

shrugs. “Or perhaps it will just lead to better trade relations between us. Either way, despite my bad

manners, I am not cold of heart. I would not let others suffer when I could easily offer my help.”

My mouth drifts open. I misjudged this man. He is kind… in a strange way.

He grins again. “I have brought a smile to your face. I can see I’ve surprised you, but pleasantly.

Am I correct?”

I laugh. “Yes, you are, King Henrick.”

“Just call me Henrick.”

“Henrick,” I repeat. “Shall we go give my brother the good news?”

“Aye. Lead the way.” He gestures to the door. “If you change your mind and decide you want me,

tell me before we reach him because I’d need to officially ask for your hand.”

“I’m sorry, Henrick, but there is little chance of that.”

He laughs. “Still, a man has to try, does he not?”

I laugh with him. “I suppose he does.”

C H A P T E R 2 0

ERRIK

Ihave to tell Father about Halla. But before I do that, I must speak with Princess Luriel. She

deserves to hear the truth before anyone else. She has been nothing but kind to me, and I do not

wish to slight her by having her hear my news from someone else first.

When I reach the palace, I head straight to the guest wing. When I reach her door, I lift my hand to

knock, but it opens right away and I find her standing on the other side.

Her lavender eyes widen in surprise. *“Prince Errik,”* she says. *“I—I was just going to look for*

you.”

“You were?”

She nods. *“I’d like to speak with you a moment.”*

“Of course.”

She motions for me to follow her out into the gardens. The rows of seaweed sway gently back and

forth in the current. Their white flowers are a lovely contrast to the pink coral that surrounds them. I

watch as a school of brightly colored fish weave in and out of their stalks.

“It’s beautiful here,” she says.

I swim up beside her, allowing my gaze to travel over the city below. The castle sits up on a high

shelf, overlooking its splendor, as Mer and fish swim past, going about their day. It is rare that I ever

stop to truly appreciate the view. *“Yes, it is,”* I agree. *“Itlana is stunning as well.”*

She nods and turns to me. *“There is something I must tell you.”*

“I must speak with you as well,” I add.

“You first,” she says, and I notice the way she clasps her hands tightly in front of her as if

worried.

“I… cannot bond with you, Luriel. I am in love with another.”

She blinks and then a wide smile curves her mouth as her shoulders sag forward in relief. *“Oh,*

thank the god of the sea,” she sighs. *“I am as well.”*

“You are?” I grin.

“Yes. I… did not know how to tell you, or how to even tell my father,” she says.

“I am the same,” I admit.

She shakes her head. *“My father wants this union between us desperately. He believes we need*

it to secure the peace between our two kingdoms, but I think we can still have an alliance without

it.”

“I do as well,” I tell her.

I hold out my arm and she takes it, clasping her hand around my forearm as I do the same to hers.

“As the heir to the throne of Atena, I vow to keep the alliance and peace between us.”

She smiles. *“And I promise the same.”*

“Errik!” my brother calls out in my mind, and I realize he must be nearby.

“Excuse me,” I tell Luriel.

“Of course.”

Luriel leaves, and I turn and find Toren swimming toward me so fast, it worries me. *“What is*

wrong?”

“You did not tell Halla about Luriel or your birthright?”

Panic stills my heart, followed swiftly by anger. *“What did you do?”*

“You’re angry with me?” he asks incredulously. *“You are the one keeping secrets. From both*

your family and the human you’ve been spending so much time with. How could you not tell her

you were to be engaged?”

“Because I’m not engaged, that’s why!”

He tips up his chin. *“Then you need to tell Father because he thinks you are still considering*

the offer. In fact, he’s almost certain you will agree—because you are not firm with him. You have

not told him that you refuse to bond with Luriel.”

Devastation wars with anger as I study my brother. It is bad enough that I hadn’t yet told her I was

the prince—now she believes I’m betrothed, too. *“I was trying to find a way to tell him. You know*

how he is. Besides, I needed to tell Luriel first. And I did.”

“You need to speak with Father. He believes he will be announcing your engagement soon.”

“No! I have to find Halla!”

“Why?”

“Because I love her, Toren!” I gesture to my tail, the faint glow barely visible, but still there. It

will only glow brighter once I’m near her again. *“She is my fated one. My markings began to glow*

last night when we—” I stop short of telling him what we did.

His eyes widen as his face pales. *“You already mated with her?”*

“No, I have not.”

His shoulders relax. *“Thank goodness. You cannot mate a human, Errik.”*

“Why not?”

“I overheard your conversation with Dorin. Humans do not mate for life, so a bonding would

never work between you. You would always be apart, and eventually, your relationship would

suffer under the constant strain.”

I do not want to hear any more. I spin to return to Solwyck.

“Where are you going?”

“To find Halla. I must explain to her. She thinks I’m betrothed, and I cannot allow her to think

that I’ve betrayed her or lied to her, Toren.”

Toren swims up beside me, grasping my arm. *“Please, Brother. Do not go. You should not be*

with a human.”

“I love her, Toren. Don’t you understand?”

“If you must go to her, fine.” He releases his grip on my arm. *“But please… do not mate her. Do*

not bind yourself to a human.”

“I love her.”

“Do you think Father and I do not love you, as well? That we do not worry for you? I don’t

want you to end up like that poor Mer who was left behind by his human mate when she took their

child.”

“Halla would not do that. She loves me, and I love her.”

I do not wait for my brother to protest further. Instead, I swim as fast as I can back to the castle. I

must find Halla and explain myself to her. I hate that she believes I betrayed her.

C H A P T E R 2 1

HALLA

I’m devastated, but I push down my emotions as Henrick and I give Gerold the good news.

Henrick will help us if we need assistance, which I suppose we will since I am likely never to

see Errik again.

He offered us treasure from the sea, but I won’t hold him to that promise, and I doubt I could bear

to speak to him or even see his face now. Not after all the lies.

Especially not after what happened between us.

Before Henrick leaves, he drops to one knee before me. “If I offended you, know that I meant

none. I simply know no other way to express myself."

A puff of air escapes my lips as I smile. "I see that now, Henrick. I'm glad we understand one

another."

He nods. "If you change your mind, I think you'd make a fine mother to our cubs."

"Cubs?" I blink, confused.

"Did I not tell you?" he smiles. "I'm a polar bear shifter."

Gerold and I exchange a look, and my brother's expression tells me this is news to him, as well.

Henrick bows to me then nods at Gerold. "I'll have my men unload the trunks that were meant to

buy your hand. You have warranted my help for free, it seems."

Gerold bows as well. "Thank you, King Henrick."

"My people will be upset that I've returned without a mate but happy we have gained some

friends and allies."

With that, King Henrick leaves. Gerold turns to me then motions to the door. "Are you sure you do

not want him? He turned out to be a rather decent fellow after all."

"Yes, but he would not love me." I sigh. "At least… not in the way I want to be loved."

Gerold nods. "I believe you are right. You would have devotion, care, and faithfulness, but

probably not love.” He arches a brow. “Though I must admit, now that I know what he is, I would

have had some interesting nieces and nephews to look forward to if you had two had married.”

I laugh for a moment before my expression sobers as my thoughts turn to Errik.

“What is wrong, my dear sister?”

I lift my gaze to Gerold and see the worry in his eyes. We’ve always been close, and he is skilled

at reading me. I do not want to lie to him when I’ve already kept secrets for weeks now. “There is

something I must tell you.”

“What is it?”

“I was… in love with someone. And—” My breath hitches. “I found out that he lied to me,

Gerold. He said he loved me, too, but he already belonged to someone else.”

My brother turns a murderous gaze toward the doors. “Who is it? One of the guards?”

I stop short of rolling my eyes. Of course, he would suspect them first. Who else have I been

around that he knows of? I can only imagine him questioning the poor men if I do not tell him

everything now. “No, it was not one of the guards.”

His expression morphs into confusion. “Well, who then? Certainly not Henrick.”

I shake my head even as the first tear drips from my lashes.

Althea appears in the doorway. “It was the Merman, wasn’t it?”

My eyes snap up to her. “How did you know?”

“The Merman that rescued you?” Gerold’s wide eyes shift to Althea then narrow.

She approaches and takes my hand. “I tried to shield you from him, my dear. The day I found you

on the beach after the dragon attack, I lied. I saw him with you and knew you remembered him in your

dreams, but I did not want to tell you.”

“Why?”

“Yes,” Gerold growls. “Why would you keep secrets from us, Althea?”

Her eyes brighten with tears. “Because I wanted to spare you the pain my parents suffered, Halla.

You do not know how terrible it is to be a child of two worlds.”

I don’t understand. “What do you mean, Althea?”

She lowers her head, and a tear slips down her cheek. She quickly brushes it away as she turns

her green eyes to us both. “My father was a Merman, and my mother was human.”

We gasp in unison.

“My mother grew tired of living separate lives. She fell out of love with my father and took me

away when I was only seven years old.” A broken sob shakes her. “I loved my father and missed him

so much, but she insisted we never see him again. It was”—her voice hitches—“terrible, and I

wanted to spare you that, Halla. To keep you from having a child with a man who can never share

your world, just as you can never truly share his. If a child were born of your union, you could lose

them as well if it was born with a tail instead of human legs.”

Gerold and I stare in stunned silence. I had no idea about Althea’s parentage.

She squeezes my hand. “Please, Halla, do not give your heart to him. One of you will break

eventually. That is the only future a Mer and a human can have: despair and heartbreak.” Her voice

quavers. “It cost my father his life.”

I tug her into an embrace. “I’m sorry that happened to you, Althea, but you don’t have to protect

me. I… found out that he does not truly love me after all. He is already betrothed to another.” I wipe

the tears from my face. “So, you do not have to worry about me. I’m done with the sea and her Mer.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Gerold gaping. “When were you planning to tell me you were

in love with Merman?”

I sigh heavily. “Oh, Gerold. Do not be angry with me; I cannot bear it today, my dear brother. My

heart is broken, and I—”

He walks over to me and embraces me warmly. He pulls Althea into the hug as well, just like we

used to embrace when we were children.

“Of course, I’m not angry with you. You know I never could be. I love you both.” He levels a

stern gaze at us. “But no more secrets. All right?”

Althea and I nod.

As Gerold takes me back to my room, I fight back my miserable tears. I refuse to break down in front

of my brother or anyone else.

When the doors close behind him, I change into my nightdress. I sit in my chair and wheel myself

onto the balcony, staring up at the stars. Tears spring to my eyes unbidden even as I try to push my

sadness down.

I don’t want to cry over Errik—not after he betrayed me—but I cannot help it. My heart is broken,

and I fear it will never be whole again. How could I allow myself to fall in love with a Mer? It never

would have worked.

He must have believed the same, or he wouldn’t have professed to love me while betrothed to a

Merwoman. I cross my arms over my chest. Maybe he did love me… just not enough. Not as much as

I loved him.

I would have given him everything. My body, mind, heart, and soul. Althea was right to try to keep

me from him. Even knowing what happened to her parents, I still would have taken a chance and

chosen Errik—if he had wanted me. That’s how much I loved him.

I lift my gaze to the moon as sobs wrack my body. I love him still.

C H A P T E R 2 2

ERRIK

Irace back to Solwyck, desperate to find Halla and explain. I can hardly bear knowing that she

believes I betrayed her and that I am engaged to another after giving my heart to her.

When I reach the shoreline, I survey the castle. A light burns on her balcony, so I call out her

name. “Halla!”

She does not answer.

I try again, but the strong wind swallows the sound of my voice. It is futile. She will never hear

me from down here.

Not for the first time, I curse that I am not human. If I were, I could easily make my way to her, but

my tail complicates everything. It does me no good at all on land because it is so cumbersome.

I swim close to the cliff wall. The tide is high and has swallowed the shoreline until no beach

remains between the sea and the wall. I gauge that the climb to her balcony would be difficult but not

impossible.

The rock wall is jagged but has plenty of handholds I can grasp. Drawing in a deep breath, I grip

the rock tightly and begin to ascend. My muscles ache in protest. Each handhold is slick and shallow,

and my lower half is completely useless as I scale the wall. However, I refuse to give up. I need to

speak with her and let her know I am not betrothed. My heart belongs only to her.

After what feels like forever, I manage to reach the shallow ledge beneath her balcony window.

When I glance down at the water, I swallow thickly as I realize just how high I've climbed.

I close my eyes, my nostrils flaring to detect her delicate scent on the breeze. I listen carefully,

training my ears for any noise she might make, but the roar of the sea is so loud I can hear nothing.

"Halla?" I call then wince, worried one of the guards might overhear.

When she doesn’t respond, I try again. This time, I hear her answer. “Errik?”

“Yes!”

“Go away.” Her voice trembles. “I don’t want to speak to you.”

“Please, Halla. I’ve climbed all this way because I need to—”

“Where are you?” Alarm creeps into her tone.

When I crane my neck, I notice her long, red hair swaying back and forth in the ocean breeze near

the balcony railing. She peers into the darkness as if searching for me.

“I’m below you. On the ledge,” I mutter, taking care not to startle her.

She looks over the edge and gasps. “Are you mad? If you fall, it will be to your death!”

I smile because her concern means she still cares for me. All hope is not lost. “I would rather risk

death than allow you to falsely believe that I do not love you.”

“I trusted you, Errik.” Her voice trembles and breaks. “Your brother told me about your

engagement. I loved you, and you betrayed me.”

“I am not betrothed. My father wants me to marry Princess Luriel, and I’ve refused. I already told

her about you. My father keeps holding out false hope that I will eventually agree to bond with her—

to keep the alliance between our kingdoms. Where my father is concerned, it is sometimes easier to

just ignore him than to argue. He has taken my silence as assent when it is not." I pause. "I do not

want anyone but you, Halla."

Her brow furrows. "Toren said you're a prince. Heir to the throne. All this time, you never told

me. Why?"

"Because I wanted to know you as simply Errik, nothing else. I hoped you would love me for who

I am instead of my title. I'm sorry, Halla."

"How can you claim to love me when you kept so many secrets from me?"

"I was a fool. Please, forgive me. I cannot bear to live without you."

Her silence worries me. After a moment, she finally speaks. "You will have to learn to live

without me, Errik." Panic tightens my chest. "We can never truly be together. We are too different. I

realize this now."

"We can be, Halla—you said so yourself. You said it did not matter that you are human and I am

Mer. You live by the sea. We will always be near each other—"

"*Near* each other," she repeats soberly, sadness plain on her face, "but never truly together, Errik.

I can see that clearly now." She pauses. "Did you know we could have conceived a child? If we had

__"

“I have heard this,” I reluctantly admit. “It is why I did not bind you to me last night on the rocks. I

have heard that children born of mixed unions are either Mer or human. I… did not want to risk

conceiving a child without—”

“Telling me first? Yet another thing you concealed from me.” She pulls back from the balcony

until I can no longer see her. “Henrick may have been blunt, but he, at least, spoke the truth.”

Jealousy pours in like bitter acid at the mention of his name. “His ship is still docked. Do you

mean to bind yourself to him now?”

“No, Errik. He gave me the truth: he could offer everything but love. Ironically, I believed *you*

could offer me that. Little did I know I would have to surrender honesty; it seems you cannot offer

both. At least… not to me.”

Her words stab my heart. “Please, Halla. Forgive me.”

“I want to, Errik, but I—”

Alarms begin blaring from the city. I twist toward the docks, and notice people racing back and

forth.

Through the fog shrouding the inky darkness, something moves. Even with my superior night

vision, it is difficult to make out. I squint my eyes as if that will somehow help me to see.

At least a dozen dark-gray sails emerge from the mist, approaching the harbor.

“Who is that?” Halla asks, her voice laced with quiet fear. “What are those ships?”

Fear steals through me. Not for my safety, but for Halla and her people. I have heard tales of ships

with gray sails—horrible stories of cities left in ruin, people taken forcibly and sold into slavery.

“Pirates.” The word leaves my mouth before I can catch it. I climb the remaining, short distance to

her balcony and pull myself over the railing.

She inhales sharply, her eyes wide. “What are you—”

“I need to get you to safety, Halla.” I extend my hand. “Please, come with me before it is too late.”

She shakes her head. “I cannot just abandon my brother or my people, Errik.”

“Halla,” I plead, desperate for her to see reason. “Listen to me. I have heard stories of these

ships. I will not allow them to take you. You must come with me.”

Her door bursts inward, slamming against the wall as her brother rushes in. His jaw drops when

he sees me on the balcony.

“What are you doing here?” he asks, his voice thunderous.

“I came to speak with Halla. There are pirate ships in your harbor. I’m trying to convince her to

flee to safety with me.”

King Gerold turns to his sister. “Halla, he’s right. You must go with him.”

“I won’t leave you, Gerold.”

His eyes flicker frantically with panic and indecision before steeled resolve hardens his gaze.

“You must. Our defenses cannot fight them off. Once they dock, we will be forced into a battle on

land. If they breach the castle, they may kidnap you—or worse. I will not allow that to happen.”

“I can fight, Gerold.”

“No, Halla, you cannot. Not as you are. I’m sorry. You must go with him.” His gaze shifts to me.

“Before it is too late.”

An explosion splits the air behind me, and I whip my head toward the harbor just as King

Henrick’s ship fires a cannon at the closest invading pirate vessel.

Gerold rushes to the balcony’s edge. “Henrick took one down, but there are dozens.” He spins

back to Halla, gripping her shoulders. “Please, Halla. Go. I must know you are safe.”

Her eyes swell with tears. “I do not want to leave you, Gerold. You’re the only family I have

left.”

“You must, Halla. If I fall in battle, you are Solwyck’s queen. You must live. Do you understand?”

He searches her eyes. “You must live, Halla.”

Another explosion sounds from the harbor. Panic tightens my chest. “We have to go, Halla. Now.”

She nods and turns her attention back to Gerold, hugging him tightly. “I love you, Gerold. Please,

whatever you do… you must survive, my dear brother. Please.”

He drops his forehead to hers. “I will do my best. Now go.”

Reluctantly, she wheels closer to me. I wrap my arm around her and peer over the balcony. I am

familiar enough with this part of the sea that I know where the rocks lie below and where we must

aim when we jump.

I look back at her. “We have to jump, Halla. That is the fastest way.”

Fear bleeds into her eyes as she looks over the balcony at the water below.

“You have to trust me, Halla. Please.”

She nods shakily. “I do.”

My heart clenches as I place her on the edge of the balcony, readying to jump. I cast one last

glance at her brother, who watches us intently. “I will gather my warriors,” I vow. “We will do what

we can to help you. I swear.”

He dips his chin, then we drop over the side.

C H A P T E R 2 3

HALLA

W e tumble through the air with dizzying speed. The water rises to meet us, and the world

slows for a moment before we hit the surface, plunging deep into the dark waters below.

A strong current pulls at my form, ripping me from Errik’s arms. I spin away,

blinking in the darkness, completely disoriented and struggling to determine which way is up. My

lungs burn from lack of oxygen as darkness creeps in around the edges of my vision.

Solid arms wrap around my form. Errik pulls me toward him. He seals his mouth over mine,

giving me his merman’s kiss. I gasp, filling my lungs with much-needed oxygen now that I’m able to

breathe underwater.

He takes my hand to lead me toward our rock and to safety, but I pull back. *“Halla, we have to*

go,” he speaks in my mind.

“No. We have to do something about those ships.”

“We will. I will contact my forces after I get you to safety.”

I turn my gaze to the harbor. The ships are so close, they are almost at the docks. *“No, Errik!*

There isn’t time. We cannot let them reach land. If we do, my brother and our soldiers will be

overrun. They’ll take the city and breach the castle in no time.”

He shakes his head, and I know he means to argue. Before he can protest, I tip my chin up and

demand, *“Take me to the ships. We can sabotage them with the help of your people. I will not wait*

idly by while my people defend the city. I must do something, Errik. Please.”

Indecision plays across his face before he finally nods. He wraps his arms around me and heads

toward the harbor.

He slips beneath the water, and I hear his voice in my mind as he calls to nearby Mer. *“Anyone*

who can hear me, this is your prince, Errik. The city of Solwyck is under attack by pirates. We must

help them or they will be overrun. Spread the word. Call all our warriors to Solwyck harbor. We

cannot allow the city to fall into the hands of pirates.”

We’re halfway to the ships when his brother swims up beside us. I recognize him immediately. He

speaks in my head. *“Halla, what are you—”*

“I think I know how to sabotage the ships,” I interrupt.

“How?”

“*Get me onto the deck of the closest one. They will have gunpowder for their cannons. If we*

can light it, it will destroy their ships. ” I face Errik. “*Spread the word among your people*.”

C H A P T E R 2 4

ERRIK

A s soon as we reach the closest ship, Halla and I position ourselves along one side. I search

for a way to pull myself up and spot a rope hanging over the edge of the deck.

Quietly, I pull myself up and reach back for Halla. Toren lifts her to me, and I haul her

the rest of the way. I turn to her and whisper, “Now what?”

My gaze sweeps the deck for any sign that we’ve been spotted. However, all the pirates are lined

up at the opposite railing, their attention focused on the city as they aim their cannons and fire in

succession.

The explosions are much louder now that we’re close, and I want nothing more than to cover my

ears against the onslaught, but we must press on.

“We need to get that”—she points at a lantern hanging beside the door to the hold—“and throw it

on those.” She points to several barrels on deck. “It will cause the gunpowder to ignite and destroy

the ship.”

I lean over the edge of the deck and relay this to my brother. “Spread the word to our people. We

must destroy their vessels before they dock or all may be lost.”

Toren nods then slips beneath the water. Despite all the chaos that surrounds us, I notice the flash

of tails in the water. My chest swells with pride. My people have answered my call and come to help

the people of Solwyck once more.

“I’ll get the lantern,” I tell Halla.

Before she can argue, I drag myself across the deck. The coarse wood rubs against my scales and

skin. Splinters dig into my flesh, but I ignore the stinging sensation as I keep one eye trained on the

pirates and the other on my goal.

When I reach the hold, the lantern is so high, I must stretch to reach it. As soon as my hand touches

the handle, the door opens. My heart stops then begins hammering as I come face to face with one of

the pirates.

His jaw drops, revealing a mouth missing its teeth. He releases a shaking breath, the foul stench

wrinkling my nose and making my eyes swim. I take advantage of his shock and slam his head against

the door. He collapses to the deck in a crumpled heap.

I gather the lantern then drop back to the wooden deck, dragging myself toward Halla.

A loud noise draws my attention, and I twist onto my back in time to see a pirate lunging at me

with a knife. Unable to dodge quickly enough, I cry out when he sinks the blade deep into my side.

Blinding pain rips through me, but I grip the handle firmly. I pull the knife from my body, plunging

it deep into his chest.

I watch with cold satisfaction as the light fades from his eyes. A glance at his companions tells me

no one witnessed the fight.

Quickly, I make my way back to Halla, gritting my teeth against the pain of each movement. Warm

blood pools beneath me, my hand slipping on the red liquid by the time I reach her.

She touches my face. “How badly are you injured?”

“I’m fine,” I lie, brushing off her concern. “What do we need to do with this?”

She takes the lantern from my hand. “I’m going to throw this on the powder. We must swim away

as fast as we can before it explodes. All right?”

I nod. She counts to three and tosses the lantern at the barrels. The glass shatters and a fiery ball

of flame bursts outward. Fire licks across the wooden planks of the deck, creeping up the barrels.

Panic constricts my chest as I grab Halla's waist and push us both over the edge of the ship,

dropping into the sea. The saltwater stings my wound, but I bite back my pain as we swim away from

the ship. More Mer flee with us. The screams of the pirates drown out all other sounds as they realize

their ships are on fire.

"Put it out! We have to—"

A deafening *boom* splits the air, and I spin in the water, shielding Halla from the blast of heat as

the ship explodes, raining down fire and debris. Another ship soon follows, exploding in a brilliant

display of smoke and fire along the harbor.

My vision blurs as I struggle to stay conscious. Halla's voice barely penetrates the fog, the sound

distant even though she is in my arms.

"Errik?" My brother grabs me, pulling me to him. "You're bleeding!"

Halla brushes the hair back from my face as I float limply in the water, my gaze fixed on the sky

overhead.

I take her hand, squeezing with the last of my strength. “You are my heart, Halla. I love you.”

Closing my eyes, I fall away into darkness.

C H A P T E R 2 5

HALLA

Panic stops my heart. “He’s losing too much blood, Toren. We have to get him to shore and

staunch the bleeding.”

He grabs Errik, pulling him past the burning ships to the shoreline. Mangled bodies float

amidst the debris, but I push through the corpses as we make our way to the beach.

A white bear rushes across the sand. My heart stills for a beat before I realize it must be Henrick.

He skids to a halt in front of us, his eyes black as his nostrils flare. “Your Merman?” he asks, and I

note his voice is a rumbling growl in his bear form.

Toren watches him warily as he holds his brother’s limp form in his arms.

“Can you find Healer Althea and bring her here?” I ask.

He nods his massive head and starts back toward the castle.

Other white bears lumber along the shoreline, mingling with Solwyck’s humans. Henrick and his

men must have been preparing to defend the harbor and the city in case the pirates docked.

In the distance, I notice a flash of red hair. “Gerold!” I cry out.

His head whips toward me, and he races down to the beach. He drops to his knees before me,

gathering me into his arms. “Thank the gods you are safe.” His eyes sweep to Errik, and he gasps.

“What happened?”

“One of the pirates stabbed him while we were lighting fire to the ships. Errik’s people—”

“Saved the city,” Gerold finishes my sentence. He hugs me again. “And so did you.”

Tears stream down my face as I study Errik. “We have to help him, Gerold.”

I cup Errik’s cheek, turning his face to me. I press a tender kiss to his lips. “Please, Errik. You

have to live, my love.”

Several Mer gather around us, bowing in mourning as they observe their prince.

The crowd parts to allow a Merman wearing a golden crown through. He stops on the shore

beside Errik. Toren’s eyes are full of tears as he addresses him. “Father, Errik’s been hurt.”

Another Merman approaches behind him. He rushes to Errik’s side, laying his hands over his

injury as he studies him. “What happened?”

“One of the pirates stabbed him while we were trying to sabotage the ship,” I explain, unable to

hide the quaver of my voice.

A collective gasp moves through the crowd, and I look up to find Henrick running to the shore

with Althea on his back.

“It’s all right,” I tell the Mer. “The bear is King Henrick. He will not harm you.”

Althea slides off his back and drops to her knees beside Errik, her brows drawn as she assesses

his wound.

“Who are you?” the Mer already examining him asks.

“I am Healer Althea. Who are you?”

“Healer Dorin.”

Together, they run their hands over him while the rest of us look on anxiously. After a moment,

Althea pulls back, sorrow in her voice. “His wound is fatal.”

The king levels a dark glare at her. “Who are you to make this determination?”

She tips her chin up. “I am a Healer, and I am half Mer. My father was one of your people, and my

mother was human.”

Dorin’s face pales. “You are the child… your human mother took you away.”

She nods, tears filling her eyes.

Errik’s father darts a glance at me, then turns to Toren. “This is the human you told me about?”

“Yes, Father. Errik says she is his fated one.”

Clenching his jaw, he faces me. “This is true? You love my son?”

I drop my gaze to Errik. “With all my heart.” I draw in a deep and steeling breath, then lift my

eyes to him again. “I am going to save him.”

C H A P T E R 2 6

HALLA

For all his massive size in his bear form, Henrick is quite nimble, even with me on his back.

We pick our way through the woods toward the blood witch’s cabin.

I’ve never ventured this deep into the forest. The trees are so densely grouped, they create

a canopy overhead that the sun’s rays cannot penetrate. If I did not know any better, I’d believe it was

nearly dark instead of only midmorning.

Dorin and Althea believe Errik is beyond hope, that he has very little time left before he crosses

from this world to the next, and that I should just give up. However, I refuse to accept his fate. Many

things may seem impossible until they aren’t.

Before a dragon attacked the city, I never believed I could slay one. Before I lost the ability to

walk, I never thought I'd still be able to live a full life. Until I was challenged, I never knew exactly

what I was capable of.

"You are certain this is the way?" Henrick asks, pulling me back from my thoughts.

"Yes." I pause. "I can never thank you enough for carrying me, Henrick. No one else would have

brought me if not for you."

"My motives are not purely unselfish, you know," he replies.

I still, wondering if he will ask me to marry him again. Surely he'd realize that the answer would

be no. After all, he is taking me to a blood witch to make a deal to save my Merman lover's life.

He continues, "I do this because of the great balance."

"The great balance? What is that?" I ask, curious to understand.

"All actions have consequences—good and bad. The choices we make are weighed in the grand

scheme of things. Some call it fate, others chance. Whatever name you choose, the balance exists

nonetheless."

"I don't understand," I admit.

“You saved your city from a dragon and lost your legs. Now you will sacrifice again to save your

Merman.” He pauses to allow the weight of his words to settle between us. “If the balance holds true,

this will be repaid to you in kind. You will save him, and someone will eventually save you.”

My brow furrows. “From what?”

He shrugs, shifting me slightly on his back. “I do not know. However, I do expect that since I’ve

helped you, someday someone else may be inclined to offer me aid when I need it in turn.”

I consider his words. “That is an interesting worldview.”

He nods. “It is the way of the North.”

That seems to be his answer for everything, and I find myself curious to visit Arnafell now. To see

how these people of the North live with their blunt truths and manners, and yet, hearts of solid gold.

Ahead, a clearing shines brightly in the distant dark, a patch of light filtering in from above. A

meager cabin sits in the center. With a thatched roof, two windows, an aged wooden door, and a

compact garden to one side, one would never suspect what lies within.

As we approach, my nerves begin to fail me. I clench my hands into fists, clinging to Henrick’s fur

to try to still their shaking. When we reach the door, I steel myself and slide off his back.

He shifts back into his human form, and I'm surprised to see him clothed even though he explained

this to me on our way here. Just as he shifts from one form to the next, he can conjure the appearance

of clothing so as not to appear naked.

He lifts me into his strong arms and holds me tightly to his chest as I knock on the door.

"Enter!" A woman's voice calls from inside.

Henrick pushes the door open, and the strong scent of herbs greets us. The floor is bare earth. In

one corner, a worn wooden worktable is covered in bottles of unlabeled, colorful liquids. I note all

the various herbs and plants hanging from the ceiling to dry. A fireplace with a roaring fire sits along

the opposite wall. Before it stands another chair, bearing a woman.

She turns, and I gape at her. She is one of the most beautiful people I've ever seen. She has long,

lavender hair that hangs past her shoulders, sharp, tipped ears like the Fae or the Elves, violet skin,

and amber eyes that seem to pierce me. "I have been expecting you," she says matter-of-factly.

She is a blood witch, so I do not question this statement. Besides, I am only here for one thing,

and I feel we must hurry. “Then you already know what I want.”

She stands and walks toward me, her eyes narrowing on Henrick. He growls in his throat. “Mind

yourself, witch,” he snarls. “I’ll not allow you to hurt her.”

A smirk twists her lips. “Oh, but you will if it is her choice.” Her eyes shift to me, and she holds

out a vial of green liquid. “This is what you have come for. Would like to hear the price?”

As she moves closer, darkness seems to swell all around her. As if night and shadow cling to her

form. She smiles and I wince inwardly when I notice two rows full of teeth, long and sharp as knives.

Her nails extend into long, black claws, lethal and deadly.

I swallow against the knot of fear in my stomach. “What is the price?”

“Your love.”

My head jerks back. “I don’t understand.”

She reaches out and runs her finger along my chin and jaw, her sharp claws grazing my skin as her

amber, reptilian eyes search mine. “Many understand how powerful of an emotion love can be, but

most do not realize it creates magic, as well.”

“Magic?”

“Yes.” Her lips curl up in a sinister grin and her sharp teeth seem to grow even longer. “One of

the most powerful forms there is. You will give this potion to your Merman, and he will heal. In

exchange, your memories of him, along with the love that you feel, will be transferred to me."

She caresses my face, and I jerk away from her touch as she cackles "Yes. A pure love like yours

will offer me much energy indeed and help keep me beautiful and young."

Her words stop my heart. How many have made such deals with her in the past for her to appear

as she does now?

I blink at her. "So, I won't remember Errik?"

"No. You will not." She narrows her eyes as she studies me. "Do you accept?"

A growl rumbles Henrick's chest as he addresses the witch. "She will still lose him if she takes

your offer."

"Yes," the witch says, her voice a low hiss. "But at least he will live."

I place a hand on Henrick's chest, his blue eyes meet mine evenly. "I cannot let Errik die,

Henrick. Not when I could help him."

"Good," the witch says, narrowing her eyes at Henrick. "Here you are." She places the vial in my

hand.

His lips curl back in a feral snarl as he levels an icy glare at her. “If your potion does anything

else to her, I will be your death, old woman.”

She narrows her eyes. “I would expect nothing less from a bear shifter. But I assure you it will

take her memories and her love of her Merman. Nothing else.”

I turn to Henrick. “Let’s go. We must hurry.”

The trip back to the city seems to take forever, but in truth, I’m sure we take less time than we took to

reach the witch. Henrick knows the way back since we’ve already traveled it, and this knowledge

lends speed to our journey.

As soon as we reach the shore, Errik’s father lifts his gaze. Humans and Mer alike gather in silent

vigil around Errik, who lies on a makeshift cot brought from the infirmary of the castle.

Gerold’s expression is thunderous when he notices the vial. “What did you have to promise her in

exchange?”

I clench my jaw and tip my chin up in determination as Henrick carries me to Errik’s side. “I will

lose my memories of him and forget our love for each other.” I turn to Toren and take his hand as I

meet his gaze evenly. “Please, tell him that I did this for him. I will not remember any of the time we

have spent together.”

His eyes shine with sadness as he nods grimly. “Of course.”

I cup Errik’s face, turning his head toward me. I lean down and press a tender kiss to his lips as a

tear drips from my lashes to his cheek. “I love you, Errik.”

Grief swells as I open his mouth and pour the green liquid onto his tongue. His lips move as he

swallows, and darkness overwhelms me.

C H A P T E R 2 7

ERRIK

My eyes snap open. The first thing I become aware of is my father’s face leaning over me. I

blink up at him. “Father? What are you doing here?”

His eyes brim with tears. “My son, you are well again.”

I sit up, only now noticing we’re on the beach. “What do you mean? I—”

I stop as myriad pieces of memories flit through my mind. Panic tightens my chest when I do not

see Halla nearby. “Where is Halla?”

Pain reflects in Dorin’s eyes. “She saved you, Errik. You were near death.”

“Where is she?”

He lowers his gaze. “They took her back to the castle. She fell unconscious after she gave you the

potion.”

“Potion?” I scowl. “What are you talking about?”

Toren places a hand on my shoulder. “There is much I must tell you, my dear brother.”

Days turn into weeks, and still, I wait along the shoreline, hoping for even one glimpse of her. She

does not come to the sea as she used to, however. Instead, she spends her days in the castle.

Sometimes I am fortunate, when she wheels to the edge of her balcony, gazing out at the sea, like she

does today.

She does not remember me. At all.

A tremulous smile crests my lips as one of the guards helps her to stand. Her knees shake as she

steadies herself. She is unable to walk without holding onto someone for balance, but still… it is

progress and I am happy for her.

Movement ripples the water nearby, and I turn to find Toren. He swims up beside me. “You cannot

keep coming here, Errik. It is not good for you. You must move on.”

“She is my fated one, Toren. I love her. I cannot just leave.”

Gerold appears on the walkway, making his way down to the beach with Althea to give me my

daily report. Their eyes shine with pity.

“How is she today?”

Gerold steps forward. “She has regained a bit more movement, very slowly. She can stand and

walk for a bit, but not without assistance. She does not complain, however. It is not in her nature to do

so even though I know she is disappointed that her function has not returned fully.”

Althea turns her attention to me. “In truth, she is melancholy, and I hate seeing her this way. I

thought it was wrong for her to fall in love with you, but now, I am not so sure.” She pauses. “She

was happy with you… spending time in the sea.”

Her words catch me by surprise, for it is she who only a few weeks ago was encouraging me to

move on despite my protests that I could not. How could I? How can I ever move on knowing that the

female I love is so close yet so far away?

“What are you saying?” I ask.

She clenches her jaw as if considering whether to share her thoughts. Indecision plays across her

features for a moment before she speaks. “There is something that may help her regain her memory.”

“What is it?”

“A blue pearl.”

I shake my head. “Those are a myth.”

“No,” she insists. “They are not.”

I blink at her in astonishment. “Where can I find one? The myths mention they are extremely rare.”

“There is a dragon in Eryadon. It is rumored that he has a blue pearl; that he stole it from a Sea

Witch many years ago.”

“A dragon? How will I get the pearl from a dragon?”

“He is cursed and lives in a castle along the coastline. But you must be careful. He is the same

dragon who burned the city of Bryndor to ash.”

I still at her words. Everyone knows what happened to Bryndor. Almost the entire city was

reduced to fire and ash. It still lies in ruin, even to this day. It was once the shining jewel of its

kingdom, known far and wide for its beauty and as a hub of commerce and trade.

The devastation visited upon Solwyck is but a shadow of what happened there. If not for Halla’s

sacrifice and bravery, her city would have suffered the same fate.

Despite my fear, I will not waver in my resolve. I will do whatever it takes to restore Halla’s

memories. I cannot bear to be without her any longer. I meet Althea’s gaze evenly. “In the myths, it is

said that the pearls only work under the light of a full blue moon. Is this truth as well?”

She nods.

Worry fills me. There are roughly seven months until the blue moon comes. If I have not retrieved

the blue pearl by then I will have to wait a little over two years before the next blue moon cycle. And

if the dragon truly has one, who knows how long it will take me to retrieve it.”

As if reading my thoughts, she places a hand on my shoulder. “You must hurry. You do not have

much time.”

C H A P T E R 2 8

ERRIK

W e have traveled down Eryadon’s coastline for three long days, but I believe I have found

the dragon’s castle. My brother Toren swims beside me, and although I initially tried to

dissuade him, I am glad for his company.

“There is a human woman with him in the castle.”

My brow furrows. “Does she know who he is?”

“I do not believe so. When I went hunting yesterday, I saw them sitting on the cliff wall above the

ocean. I tried luring her away to safety with my song, but it did not work.”

I frown. “She must not realize he is a dragon. I will certainly inform her. Perhaps she can tell me

where he keeps the pearl.”

“How do you propose to get it?” Toren asks incredulously.

“It’s not as if I cannot drag myself onto land.” I shrug. “Yes, it will be difficult, but not

impossible.”

He purses his lips. “This does not seem like much of a plan.”

“I know, but we have no other choice. This is the only way I can restore Halla’s memories.”

His gaze holds mine for a moment but he does not protest further. He knows I am right. “I will go

hunting again while you keep watch.”

I glance at him as he swims off, then turn my attention back to the castle. The dragon seems to split

his time between the palace and a cave further down the coast. He flew off not long ago, but I will

wait a few more minutes to see if he returns. I suppose I will have no choice but to just ask him for

the pearl. I will give him whatever he wants in return, although I’ve never known dragons to want for

anything.

They do love treasure and wealth, however, so I plan to offer him whatever riches I can find at the

bottom of the sea. Hopefully, he will consider this a fair exchange. If he doesn’t, I will simply have to

steal the pearl from him somehow.

My thoughts go round in a circle as I consider my options, which are not many. In the end, I have

no choice. If I want Halla back, this is the only way, according to Althea.

She said her father told her about the blue pearls. I always believed they were nothing more than a

myth, but it seems I was wrong.

I only know one thing for certain: I must retrieve the blue pearl and bring it to Halla during the

blue moon cycle, which is fast approaching.

The pearls are rumored to grant a wish of the wearer—their heart’s greatest desire—but only if

their intentions are true.

I sought council from Dorin concerning the pearls. According to his research, I will have to wear

the pearl and kiss Halla for it to work. I only pray all the legends are correct.

As I survey the cliff wall leading toward the dragon’s castle, I notice the human woman approach.

She carries a long stick that sweeps before her, every so often tapping the ground. Her long, blonde

hair blows around her face with the ocean breeze, and her gaze appears fixed on nothing. Her

behavior is strange, and I wonder if perhaps she cannot see.

I open my mouth and begin singing, hoping to lure her to the sea. She does not know how much

danger she is in with the dragon. Surely she does not, else she would not stay with him… unless she

is his prisoner.

“Hello?” she calls out to me, and I stop singing.

My heart hammers as I respond, “Come down to the ocean, dear human.”

“If you are one of the Mer, I have no desire to be lured into the sea,” she replies. “I simply need

help finding my way.”

“You do not feel a pull to the ocean?” I ask, unable to hide the curiosity in my tone. I’d always

heard our song could draw a human to the ocean, unless they were already in love with another.

“No. I am trying to find the dragon’s cave. Surely you know where it is, for I heard your song not

long ago near the cliffs.”

I frown. “I will not help you find your death.”

Her mouth drifts open. “Is that not what your siren call is meant to do? Lure me to the water so

that I may drown?”

“No,” I scoff. Does she think I am evil? “Contrary to the tales you may have heard, my kind does

not lure innocents to the sea only to drown them."

"Then, why do you sing?"

"Many Mermen want a wife. Humans are rumored to be excellent lovers," I tease, trying to put

her at ease. "Passionate creatures like ourselves."

When she doesn't rise to the bait, my expression sobers. "I have watched you with the dragon. I

want only to save you from him. Do you know who he truly is, my lady?"

"Yes. He is the dragon who burned the city of Bryndor."

Good. She knows, so the rest should be easy. "Then you understand why I wish to lure you from

his claws."

"You misunderstand," she says. "He has changed. He is not the same dragon he was before. I… I

love him."

I chuckle softly. "So that is why my brother's song did not influence you. He wondered about

that."

"Please, I must find the dragon before it is too late."

"Too late for what?"

"He is under a curse. I am bound to it as well. I will die at the end of the blood moon cycle if it is

not broken. I must find him before then."

“So, it is true. A curse lies upon the dragon and his castle,” I muse. “My people had heard of this

but were uncertain.”

“What is your name?” she asks.

“Errik. What is yours?”

“Alara. Will you help me to find the dragon’s cave, Errik?”

I do not want to help her find the dragon, but I need the pearl. If she claims the dragon is a good

man, I have no other choice but to trust her judgment. I must find the blue pearl. “If that is what you

truly wish.”

“I do.”

“You are close. Simply continue along the cliffs, and I will stay nearby until you reach the cave.”

She smiles, and my heart fills with guilt. “Thank you, Errik.”

“Do not thank me,” I reply somberly. “Helping you find him goes against my every instinct.”

She cocks her head to the side. “Then why do you help me?”

I am compelled to admit the truth to her; Toren and I have been observing them both for the past

few days. “Because I believe he cares for you… although I did not know dragons were capable of

caring for another,” I murmur. “I heard him call on the blood witch a few days ago. He offered his

blood to the sea to get her attention, then begged her to spare his beloved. Since my song did not

tempt you, I assume he was referring to you. You are obviously in love with him, as well. If you were

not, my siren’s song would have called you to the sea.”

A smile crests her lips.

“Have you heard of what happened in Solwyck?” I ask, referring to the damage wrought by the

dragon there. Solwyck would have been reduced to ash just like Bryndor if Halla had not slain the

dragon.

She nods.

“Then you know that dragons are dangerous creatures.”

“I know, Errik. But Veron is different.”

“I hope you are right,” I tell her. “You are nearly there.”

“Why have you been watching Veron?”

“In truth, I seek something he owns. I was told that the dragon who lives in the kingdom of

Eryadon near the sea has what I need.”

“What is it?”

“I am uncertain,” I answer truthfully, because I have never seen a blue pearl before; I only know

that I must find one. “I was told that I would know it when I see it.”

“Why do you need it?”

“It is… for a friend,” I hedge, uncertain of how much to share with her. If I tell her it is for my

fated mate, and she reveals this to the dragon, he will know he can demand anything in exchange.

While I would not mind giving him whatever he wants, I must return to Halla as soon as possible. I do

not have time to mine the ocean floor for untold amounts of lost treasure.

Instead of explaining my reasons, I change the subject. Alara and I chat as I guide her to the

dragon’s cave. When she draws closer, I instruct her to take only a few more paces to her right.

She turns to thank me, and I gasp when my eyes alight on the blue pearl necklace she wears. “That

necklace. Where did you get it?”

She wraps her hand around the pearl, clutching it to her chest. “Veron gave it to me.”

“Please,” I beg, desperate now that I’ve found what I’m after. “May I have it?”

“I…” She hesitates.

“Please. I need it for Princess Halla.”

She blinks several times. “The Princess of Solwyck?”

“Yes.”

“Alright,” she agrees and begins to unfasten the clasp from around her neck.

The dragon approaches behind her in his two-legged form, glaring at me thunderously. Tall and

broad-shouldered, he is covered in silver scales that gleam beneath the sun like heavy armor. His

proud, dark horns spiral from his head, making him appear even taller as he stands behind her and

places his hands on her shoulders. His green eyes narrow.

She traces her hands up his arms and smiles. “Veron?”

He wraps his arms around her, pulling her close. “What are you doing here?” he asks her. “Why

have you come?”

I’m surprised by the tenderness in his tone and gaze as he regards her.

“I needed to find you. I—”

“Did you walk all this way by yourself?” he asks, a hint of anger shifting into his tone as he

chastises her for not being careful.

She snaps back, and I note in astonishment that he looks chagrined. A human chastising a dragon?

This is not something I ever thought I’d see.

She gestures to the sea. “I had help from Errik.”

“A Merman?” he grinds out, leveling another dark glare at me.

She places her hands on her hips. “Well, he said the same thing about dragons. If not for him, I

would have been lost. I probably would have missed your cave entirely, Veron.”

He bares his fangs at me, obviously displeased by her words. His gaze drops to her neck. “What

are you doing with your necklace?”

“Errik said he needs it for Princess Halla of Solwyck.”

“Why does the princess need this?” Veron roars at me.

“She made a deal with a blood witch,” I call out. “I am trying to free her from the consequences.”

Surely he understands this since I observed him summoning a blood witch a few days ago. It

seems he is indebted and under a curse from one, as well.

He grows silent.

Alara takes his hand. “If it will help the princess, we should give it to him, Veron.”

He lifts the necklace and pendant from her palm. “It is… an invaluable treasure from the very

heart of the sea. Powerful and—”

“I don’t need any treasures,” she says, stroking his cheek. “All I need is you.”

It does not escape me how he closes his eyes and leans into her hand as if relishing her touch.

A dragon in love with a human? I only pray that he is worthy of such love and devotion.

“Treat her well, Dragon,” I interject, feeling oddly protective of this human. She reminds me of

my beloved Halla. “Or you will know the wrath of the seas.”

“She is mine,” he growls. “I would never harm my greatest treasure.” With that, he throws the

pearl at me. “Take the necklace and leave us, you troublesome fish.”

I leap from the water to catch it, smiling once I feel the pearl in hand. “Thank you. I will tell the

princess that you helped her.”

“I doubt she’ll want to know that a dragon aided her,” he mumbles.

“I meant Alara, not you.” I laugh. “The princess has no love of dragons, as you well know.

Goodbye, Alara! And thank you!”

“Goodbye, Errik!”

I race back to find my brother, anxious to return to Halla.

C H A P T E R 2 9

HALLA

It’s been months since the city was attacked. Carefully, I make my out to the balcony, overlooking

the sea. I still have not regained the full use of my legs, and more days than not, I am bound to my

chair when my pain becomes too great. But at least I have gained the ability to walk short

distances without any assistance.

I wish I could walk normally, as I used to. I remember the joy of running along the beach and then

diving into the water for a swim to cool myself after. It has been so long since I swam. Perhaps I've

avoided it for fear that I am not strong enough to navigate the current without the full use of my legs.

But part of me suspects it is that I worry it will not be the same. And that instead of joy, I will only be

sad because I may not be able to swim as well as I used to.

I watch as the blood moon slowly rises over the sea. It is full this night, casting shimmering

reflections among the rolling waves. The crisp, saline breeze blows through my long, scarlet hair and

I inhale deeply. Something about the ocean calls to me. As if my soul is searching for something out

among the waves, but I do not know what.

A pair of glowing blue eyes blink at me in the distance. Observing me from the water, near one of

the many rock formations that jut up through the surface.

I know there are Mer in these waters, but there is something so familiar about the eyes that watch

me. It's as if I know them somehow, but I do not understand why.

I dream of a man with eyes like this and short, dark hair the color of obsidian stone. In my dreams,

he reaches for me and whispers softly, “You are my heart, Halla.”

I’ve been down to the shoreline searching for the owner of these eyes, but have never found them.

Even as I think this, I realize that I have never ventured down there during the night for fear I might

fall and that no one would find me, to help me if I could not get back up, until morning.

“Come to me, Halla,” a voice seems to whisper on the wind. *“Find me.”*

Drawing in a deep breath, I steel my courage. I turn away from the balcony quietly make my way

through the castle, careful as I descend the stairs to the lower level.

My progress is slow and my legs feel weak, but I refuse to give up as I continue out into the

gardens and down the pathway to the shoreline.

When I reach the beach, the waves crash upon the shore. The warm water washes over my feet

and ankles, leaving trails of seafoam in the sand as it retreats. I brace myself on a nearby rock and

slip out of my nightdress, leaving me in only my soft, lace undergarments.

I’ve never been worried of being seen on the part of the beach. No one ever comes out here but

me. And if any Mer are in these waters, I understand that their people think nothing of nudity, anyway.

My hair whips around me as the cool air blows in off the sea. Cautiously, I make my way into the

water, determined to understand why the ocean and those glowing blue eyes call to me.

C H A P T E R 3 0

ERRIK

Ihave awaited this day for forever. It has been several long months, but the blue moon has come

and it will be full this evening.

My father's voice fills my mind. *"My son, I would speak with you before you leave."*

I go to him, finding him alone in his throne room. *"What is it, Father?"*

"You are sure this is what you want?"

"I am," I reply without hesitation.

His expression grows sad. He places a hand on my shoulder. *"I worry for you, you know. I know*

that, at times, I have been… hard on you, but it is only because I wanted the best for you, my son."

I swallow against the lump in my throat. *"I know, Father."*

"After your mother died, you and Toren were all I had. You are my greatest treasures, my two

sons," he says.

Toren enters a moment later and swims toward us. His blue eyes studying me. *"You really mean*

to go through with this? To bind her to you if she regains her memories and agrees to take you as

her mate?"

"Yes."

I'm surprised when he throws his arms around me, hugging me tight. My father's arms go around

us both, a moment later.

"It will not be an easy life, my son," he whispers in my mind.

"I know. But I cannot live without her. She is my heart, Father—she is my fated one."

"Then, go with my blessing," he says.

"And mine as well," Toren adds.

As soon as night falls, I head straight for the castle. I break through the surface and lift my gaze to

the dark sky and the full blue moon overhead. I have waited almost seven months for this moon to

arrive.

I'm desperate to find Halla, praying the blue pearl will help restore her memories. I have missed

her and long to hold her in my arms again.

With the blue pearl necklace around my neck, I swim close to the cliff wall, beneath the castle. I

want desperately to climb up to her room, but I do not want to risk scaring her in case this does not

work.

No, I must be patient. I must—

My heart stops as she makes her way onto the balcony of her room. Her red hair blows gently

behind her in long, crimson waves as her blue eyes scan the ocean.

When her gaze meets mine, she stills.

"Come to me," I reach out to her with my thoughts, praying that something inside her will hear.

That somehow her soul will recognize mine and know that I am here. *"Find me."*

I watch as she moves away from the balcony and goes back inside. I wait anxiously for her to

appear at the top of the path that leads to the shoreline from the castle.

She is able to walk now, but it is not easy for her and I know it will take time for her to make her

way to the beach. I just pray that this is what she is doing. That she is on her way to the ocean, even

now.

Worry tightens my chest that she will not come after all. I'm at war with myself, fighting the urge

to simply scale the cliff wall as I've done before, and go to her balcony.

Just as I make the decision to climb, I notice her at the top of the path, near the castle. Carefully,

she makes her way down to the shoreline. Her steps are slow and a bit unsteady, but I smile as I

notice the determination etched in her features as she moves across the beach.

When she removes her sleep gown, my eyes widen as I take in her lovely form. She is even more

beautiful than I remembered.

She takes her tentative steps into the water and I swim closer to the shore, careful to remain

hidden behind a large rock jutting up from the surface, not wanting to scare her.

I've already decided that if the pearl does not work, I will simply convince her to fall in love

with me again. We will start over. I am a patient man, and I will do whatever it takes to hold her in

my arms once more.

She swims out a bit from the shoreline, her gaze searching the water. "Where are you?" she says.

"I know you're there."

I move out from behind the rock.

She inhales sharply as her eyes meet mine.

"Who are you?" She frowns, then murmurs under her breath, "Your eyes… I know them. You're

the one who watched me from the sea almost every night, are you not?"

“Yes,” I reply. “I do.”

“I… feel as if I know you but… that cannot be.”

“I promise that I am not here to harm you.”

She tilts her head to the side, studying me. “I know.”

Hope blooms in my chest. “Do you remember me?”

“You are familiar, but I do not know why.” Her brow furrows. “As if I know you from a dream.”

I smile. “We were in love, Halla. You made a deal with a blood witch to save my life. In

exchange, you sacrificed your memories and your love for me. But I have found a way to restore

them.”

She blinks at me, then lowers her gaze as if considering. After a moment, she lifts her head.

“How?”

“I must kiss you. Will you allow this?”

I wait anxiously for her answer. She is so close, I am tempted to rush to her and gather her in my

arms, sealing my mouth over hers. However, I refuse to take anything she does not give willingly. I

would never force myself upon her.

After a moment, she nods. “I will allow it.”

I move closer and carefully pull her into my arms. She eyes me warily, and I hesitate.

“I vow that I will not harm you, Halla. I would sooner end my own life.”

Her shoulders relax. Gently, I cup her cheek and capture her luminous blue eyes. My heart

hammers in my chest as I lean in ever so slightly. My mouth hovers so close to hers, the warm mint of

her breath mingles with mine.

In the corner of my eye, I notice the softly glowing blue light of my tail beneath the water. My fate

marks brightening at her nearness.

Tenderly, I press my lips to hers. At first, she remains still. My chest tightens, and I fear the spell

did not break.

She pulls back, her eyes search mine and she touches my face. “Errik,” she breathes. A tear slips

down her cheek. “I almost lost you, my love.”

Tears sting my eyes but I blink them back. “You save me, Halla.”

She traces her fingers along my torso, over the jagged scar of my injury. “I remember,” she

whispers. “I went to the blood witch and made a bargain to save your life.”

I cup her cheek. “I have missed you. So very much.” I wrap my arms around her, pulling her close.

“You are my heart, and I love you, Halla. With all that I am. I desire more than anything to bind you to

me. Please, my beloved, will you take me as your mate?”

A stunning smile curves her lips, and she kisses me passionately. She curls her tongue around

mine, deepening our kiss. “Yes.” She smiles against my lips. “I will be yours, and you will be mine,

Errik.”

I thread my fingers through her hair, gripping the long, soft red strands and tipping her head back

as I seal my mouth over hers in a claiming kiss.

C H A P T E R 3 1

HALLA

Errik claims my mouth in a passionate kiss, leaving me breathless and panting. He pulls me

close and swims us out toward the rock formation and the small island that we consider ours.

Instead of going up onto the beach, he remains in the water. He wraps his strong arms

even tighter around me, and pushes me back against one of the rocks.

I wrap my legs around his waist and twine my arms around his neck, gently running my fingers

through the hair at the nape of his neck as his gaze meets mine, full of desire and possession.

His stav is a hard bar between us; only a thin scrap of silken material separating him from my

entrance. “I want you, Halla. I long to claim you as mine. But I will not make love to you if you do not

__”

I press a finger to his lips to silence him. “I want you, Errik. More than anything.”

His glowing blue eyes hold mine with a possessive gaze. He uses his claws and tears away my

silken undergarment, leaving me bare before him.

He allows his gaze to travel down my form, tracing his fingers over my already sensitive skin

beneath the warm water.

“You are perfect,” he whispers.

He positions the crown of his stav at my entrance. His nostrils flare, and his pupils dilate until

barely a thin rim of glowing blue is visible around the edges.

“You are mine, Halla.”

My heart pounds as his gaze holds mine. With his pointed ears, glowing blue eyes, sharp fangs,

and dark claws, he is terrifyingly beautiful, but I am not afraid. He presses a tender kiss to my lips.

“You are certain you want me, Halla?” he asks.

My mouth drifts open when I glance beneath the water to his stav extending from his mating

pouch. The moonlight affording me just enough light that I can make out the details of his body. His

stav is so large, my insides involuntarily clench as I wonder how he will feel inside me.

“Yes.” I meet his eyes and my lips quiver, the breath stuttering from my lungs as he slowly enters

me.

Tight heat blooms in my core when he breaks through my barrier. A tear trickles from my lashes at

the slight pinch of pain.

He cups my chin, his eyes full of concern. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No. I just need a moment to adjust.”

He stills, and after a moment, my body adjusts to his invasion. I motion for him to continue and

inhale sharply as he sheathes himself deep inside me.

At first, he remains still. We stare at one another in mutual wonder at the feeling of our bodies

joined together. He shifts his hips, and everything changes. A low moan escapes my lips as pleasure

coils tightly within me.

He begins long, deep strokes. The strong muscles of his tail undulating beneath my fingers as he

pumps into me. My head falls back and my lips part on a moan as sensation overwhelms me. I've

never felt so full, and I love the delicious friction of his stav moving deep inside me.

He cups my breast, rolling the sensitive peak between his thumb and forefinger, careful of his

claws as he touches me.

I arch up into his hand. "More," I breathe.

Something unleashes inside him. He wraps his arms tighter around me, pinning me between him

and the rock. I always knew his body was powerful, but as he thrusts into me, I finally understand the

full extent of his strength as his powerful muscles move beneath my hands as they trace over his back

and down his tail.

His breath is warm in my ear when he groans, the muscles of my channel beginning to flex and

quiver around his length. "You're so tight," he rasps.

Another slight twinge of pain deep inside me blooms into pleasure, and I gasp at the intense

warmth that begins to suffuse me.

My body tightens around him, and I fall over the edge into my climax. Wave after wave of

pleasure washes through me as I cling to him and cry out his name.

My release triggers his, and he roars, “Mine!”

An intense burst of warmth erupts deep inside me, filling me with an endless rush of delicious

heat. It triggers another orgasm, this one even more intense than the last, and I cry out his name as

pleasure fills me so great I can barely contain it.

I’m not even recovered from my orgasm when he begins to move inside me again. His eyes search

mine. “I must have you again, Halla. Do you accept me?”

I wrap my arms around him. “Always.”

When we have finished making love for the second time, he pulls us up onto the beach. Just when I

think we’re finished, he positions his tip at my entrance and groans low in his throat as he pushes into

me.

My eyes roll to the back of my head at the delicious stretch as he sheathes himself deep in my

core.

He takes me slowly this time, his eyes staring deep into mine as he strokes into me. Another small

twinge of pain turns into intense pleasure and I arch up against him. “What is that?” I moan as the

intense sensation fills me with intense warmth.

“My stem,” he rasps. “It extends from the tip of my stav and into the entrance of your womb to fill

you with my seed.”

As he continues to move deep inside me, it doesn’t take long before I’m close to the edge once

more.

My head falls back as a low moan escapes my lips. “Errik,” I breathe out his name.

He grips my chin. “I want to watch you as you come,” he growls.

His gaze holds mine as his lips pull back in an almost feral snarl. He quickens his pace until he is

pumping into me. My body tenses like a bowstring, and I fall over the edge into complete and glorious

oblivion. He roars as warmth blooms in my core, and he fills me again with his seed.

We both pant heavily as we come down from our release. He captures my mouth in a branding

kiss and breathes against my lips, “Mine.”

C H A P T E R 3 2

HALLA

It’s been almost two weeks since my memory returned and I’ve never been happier. Moonlight

streams in from the balcony, illuminating Errik’s features. I trace my fingers lightly over the

pointed tip of his left ear and then move down the chiseled planes of muscle that line his

abdomen and chest. The scales of his body like silk beneath my hands. When I reach his tail, I marvel

at the softly glowing blue color of his scales.

Every night Errik climbs up the cliff wall to my balcony so we can sleep in my bed, in my room.

He's an insatiable lover and we make love two or three times each night. I'm as addicted to his touch

as he is to mine.

We're getting married soon and my people believe it is bad luck for the groom to see his bride the

day before the wedding. Errik is already grumbling that he'll have to spend the night before our

ceremony away from me.

As if sensing that I'm still awake, he opens his eyes. Their glowing blue color fixing on me with

an intense gaze. "I do not want to spend even one night away from you," he whispers. "The only

solace I have is knowing that after our wedding, you will officially be mine according to the ways of

your people."

I smile. "I'm already yours, my love."

He pulls me close and presses a tender kiss to my lips as he whispers against them. "You are my

heart, Halla, and I am yours.”

When I wake in the morning, we’re tangled in the sheets. I look down at my legs and gasp when I

notice that instead of a tail, Errik’s two legs are brushing against mine.

He inhales sharply beside me, staring at his legs in wonder. “How is this possible?”

“I… do not know.”

I quickly change, and he covers himself with a sheet even though his mating pouch is still intact,

hiding his stav from sight. I call for Althea, and when she enters, her eyes widen as they travel over

his form. He stands in the middle of the bedroom on two human legs.

Her eyes dart to the necklace he always wears. “The blue pearl.” She smiles. “It worked.”

He blinks. “You knew this would happen?”

“I hoped, but I was not sure.”

“Why now? Why not when Halla first regained her memory?”

She shrugs. “I do not know. Last night was the end of the blue moon cycle. Perhaps it is somehow

tied to that.”

He licks his lips, considering. “Will I remain this way?”

“There is only one way to be sure,” she replies. “We must go down to the ocean.”

She sends of the guards to retrieve my brother and his eyes widen when he steps into my room and

sees Errik standing on two legs. His entire body is still covered with scales and his lower half is

blue, but it is still strange to see him this way.

Errik wears borrowed pants from my brother as we walk through the castle. Our guards all watch

wide-eyed but say nothing as we pass. When we reach the ocean, Althea instructs Errik to walk into

the water.

Toren's head peeks above the surface. His jaw drops. "What happened to you?"

Errik smiles. "I do not know. Isn't it wonderful?"

He arches a brow. "No, you look like a human." His eyes dart to me. "Forgive me, I meant no

disrespect."

I laugh. "None taken."

Errik wades into the water, and in an instant, his legs are replaced by his gorgeous blue tail. He

flips up his fin to show us, but I notice the concern in his expression as he faces Althea. "Is it gone?

Am I stuck as a Mer again forever?"

She shakes her head. "Come back out, and we'll know."

He drags himself out of the water completely. His pants are gone, ripped from the transformation,

but his borrowed shirt covers his waist down to his thighs. We watch in awe as his tail splits back

into two human legs.

He stands and rushes toward me, pulling me into his arms and spinning me around in a slow

circle. He captures my mouth in a claiming kiss. “I can live in your world, Halla,” he whispers

against my lips. “We can make a life anywhere you wish.”

I smile and dart a glance at my brother. “Then, let us continue to live by the sea. After all,

someone has to take care of Gerold.”

Gerold laughs and embraces us warmly, pulling Althea into the hug as well. “I would like that,”

he says. “I would like that very much.”

Errik looks to Toren. “And Toren cannot do without me either.”

Toren rolls his eyes, but I do not miss the smile that tugs at the corner of his lips.

E P I L O GU E

HALLA

W e wait anxiously in the throne room for the Fae Prince Ryvan and his human wife,

Princess Ella, to arrive. They have come for our wedding and are traveling with their

royal Fae Healer to see if they can help me.

I've reached a plateau in my recovery. I'm able to walk, but only for short distances and not

without great difficulty. Sometimes the pain in my legs becomes so great that I have to use my chair. I

am grateful that I can walk, but I wish desperately to regain the full use of my legs.

One of the guards enters, interrupting our conversation. He bows low. "Forgive the intrusion,

Your Highnesses," he announces. "Prince Ryvan and Princess Ella have arrived."

My heart slams in my throat. I push my hands into my lap to still their shaking as I tip my chin up,

ready to receive our most welcome guests.

"Show them in," Gerold orders.

The doors open, and my mouth drifts open when the prince and princess appear. They are indeed

a handsome pair. He has dark hair, glowing green eyes, and the pointed ears typical of his kin, lending

him an ethereal handsomeness that human men could never achieve. A ghost of a smile crests my lips,

for not even this Fae can rival Errik's attractiveness. I take his hand in mine, squeezing gently.

The princess has chestnut hair that frames her shoulders. Her eyes are pale blue, like a clear sky

on a warm day. Her face is heart-shaped, and I smile when I realize she has freckles, just like me and

my brother.

I’m still slightly stunned that she is human. Ryvan’s father sealed the borders of their kingdom

with magic shortly after Ryvan’s mother was killed by an invading human army. He hated humans, and

I wonder how Ryvan and Ella fell in love in the first place. I make a mental note to ask her when we

are alone later.

My brother stands to greet them. “Welcome, Prince Ryvan and Princess Ella. I am King Gerold,

and this is my sister, Princess Halla, and her husband, Prince Errik. We are glad you have arrived

safely.”

Prince Ryvan inclines his head. “Thank you. We are happy to be here.” His eyes dart to me, and

I’m struck by the kindness they express. “We only hope that our Healer may be of help to the

princess.”

He glances over his shoulder, and another Fae steps into the light. His eyes glow light blue, and

his hair is the color of spun gold. He bows to us. “I am Healer Oradon.”

I smile. “I have been eagerly awaiting your arrival. Thank you very much for coming to offer aid.”

Princess Ella addresses me. “As soon as we heard you needed help, we knew we had to come.

Our kingdom knows of your bravery, Princess. We only hope that we will be able to help you.”

“You may call me Halla,” I tell her, nodding in acknowledgment.

She flashes a dazzling smile. “Then you may call me Ella.”

I like them already.

We all head to the dining hall, offering our guests food after their long journey. Ella sits beside me,

Errik and Ryvan are seated across from us, and my brother sits at the head of the table. I cannot help

but notice Ryvan lovingly place his hand over Ella’s slightly swollen abdomen when she settles.

I glance down at her stomach. “You are with child?”

“Yes.” Her face is practically glowing. “A girl.”

“How lovely.” I smile, my hand alighting over my abdomen as well.

“You are, too?” she asks.

I nod, trying to keep my expression cheerful despite my fears.

Healer Oradon tilts his head. “Forgive me. May I interject?” His gaze darts to Errik. “I

understand you are Mer—is that correct?”

Errik nods.

Oradon frowns. “You are worried because you fear the child was conceived when you were in

that form.”

My mouth drifts open. “How did you know?”

“Oradon is a seer,” Ryvan says.

“I believe the child will be Mer, but I will have to assess you to be certain.”

Panic stops my heart. “Please,” I ask anxiously. “Can you examine me now?”

He nods and stands from his chair. Approaching, he takes my hand. He closes his eyes and lowers

his head, features tensing in deep concentration. After a moment, he tips his head back up to me and

smiles.

“I was right; your daughter will be like her father. Both will live in two worlds. So will any

future children conceived of your union.”

Relief floods me, so great I feel as if my heart will burst. Gerold and Althea beam and I’ve never

been happier.

Later that night, as we lie in bed, tangled up in each other’s arms, Errik presses a tender kiss to my

temple. “Our daughter will be able to spend time with both our families.”

I comb my fingers through his hair, capturing his glowing blue eyes. “You can show her where you

came from and teach her about the sea.”

He kisses me, smiling against my lips. “More importantly, her uncle Toren can watch her

whenever her parents need some time alone.” I laugh, but he sobers. “How do your legs feel?”

“About the same, maybe a little better. I have regained more feeling, and when Oradon used his

magic, they seemed… stronger somehow. It’s too soon to know for sure, though.”

He cups my face. “And if they remain as they are?”

I know he asks because he worries I’ll fall into depression. Yet the truth is, I’ve never been more

content. I touch his cheek then trace the pointed tip of his ear as I stare deep into his eyes.

“Even if I never walk again, I do not need this to be happy, Errik. I have you and our daughter.

You are all I need, my love.”

His eyes brighten with tears as he cups my cheek. He brushes his lips against mine and whispers

against them. “You are my heart, Halla.” Gently, he splays his palm over my lower abdomen. “And I

will always be yours.”

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Captivated by the Fae: A Cinderella Retelling

Rescued By The Merman: A Little Mermaid Retelling

Bound to the Elf Prince: A Snow White Retelling

Elemental Dragon Warriors Series

Claimed by the Fire Dragon Prince

Stolen by the Wind Dragon Prince

Rescued by the Water Dragon Prince

Healed by the Earth Dragon Prince

Chosen By The Fire Dragon Guard

Saved By The Wind Dragon Guard

Treasured By The Water Dragon Guard

Taken By The Earth Dragon Guard

Cosmic Guardian Series

Charmed by the Fox's Heart

Seduced by the Peacock's Beauty

Protected by the Spider's Web

Ensnared by the Serpent's Gaze

Forged by the Dragon's Flame

Once Upon a Shifter Series

Ella and her Shifters

Snow White And Her Werewolves

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